With the first publication in 1967 of Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1984) a new and distinctive approach to sociological analysis emerged into the public domain. The new perspective rapidly gained adherents and stimulated an increasingly diverse and influential range of empirical work. But, although Garfinkel’s writings were immediately recognized as significant, ethnomethodology did not find a ready or full-hearted acceptance within the sociological community. Indeed it might be said of Garfinkel that, like Durkheim before him, his ideas have been paid ‘the tribute of unrelenting criticism’. The initial responses to ethnomethodology contained a variety of objections, many of which were strongly incompatible with one another, and the result was a period in which discussions of the new perspective were apt to generate more heat than light.

A number of factors contributed towards this outcome. Garfinkel’s writings are highly compressed and, at times, opaque and cryptic. Although they contain powerful underlying theoretical continuities, these are not systematically articulated in terms of classical sociological reference points. There has thus been scope for considerable confusion and misunderstanding among adherents as well as detractors of the enterprise. Moreover *Studies in Ethnomethodology* emerged during a period of chaotic upheaval in the social sciences in which the previously dominant Parsonian structural-functional paradigm was an early sociological casualty. Because Garfinkel’s complex writings became public property at this moment of rapid and confusing theoretical change, his seminal theorizing and extraordinary empirical investigations were often misrepresented and trivialized. The unhappy consequence was that ethnomethodology came to be construed as ‘a method without a substance’ (Coser: 1975) or, worse still, as a vehicle for the denial of social organization itself – a kind of ‘anything goes’ sociology. The inevitable outcome was that Garfinkel’s investigations, whose initial impetus derived from a most penetrating critique of the Parsonian corpus which had been undertaken long before the tide had turned against structural-functionalism, were lost in the welter of charge and counter-charge. Small wonder then that Garfinkel, who disdained to intervene in the fray, declared early on that the very term ‘ethnomethodology’ had become a shibboleth that had acquired a life of its own (Garfinkel: 1974, p. 18).

Garfinkel’s lifelong theoretical endeavours have been directed at a range of conceptual issues which have always been central topics of sociology. These issues – the theory of social action, the nature of intersubjectivity and the social constitution of knowledge – are complex and tightly interwoven. Because the conceptual formulation of these issues has wide theoretical and methodological ramifications in the conceptualization of social organization, they represent a central site of theoretical innovation within the discipline. Garfinkel has approached this domain through a persistent series of explorations of the elementary properties of practical reasoning and practical actions. In the course of these studies, he has sought to divorce the theory of action from its traditional preoccupation with motivational issues and to reorient it on the knowledgeable ways in which, whether consciously or not, social actors recognize, produce and reproduce social actions.

4 Anthony Giddens’ writings (Giddens 1976; 1979; 1984) have been a consistent exception to the generally negative tone of response to ethnomethodology. A widespread pattern of misinterpretation of the field was concretized by an apparently authoritative, but highly misleading, paper by Attewell (1972) (see Peyrot: 1982; Zimmerman: 1976 for clear critical discussions of this source). Attewell’s paper embodied many of the misunderstandings which subsequently reappeared in articles by, among others, Coser (1975), Mayrl (1973), McSweeney (1973), Mennell (1976) and Phillips (1978). By the end of the 1970s the climate of misunderstanding was so densely developed that sophisticated interventions such as that by O’Keefe (1979) did not succeed in clearing the air. Useful efforts at clarification by practising ethnomethodologists include Coulter (1971; 1973; 1974), Maynard and Wilson (1980), Peyrot (1982), Wieder (1975), Wilson and Zimmerman (1979) and Zimmerman (1976; 1978). Monograph-length secondary accounts of ethnomethodology now include Benson and Hughes (1983), Handel (1982), Heritage (1984a), Leiter (1980), Mehan and Wood (1975) and Sharrock and Anderson (1986).

5 There are, of course, many levels of ‘consciousness’ with respect to the organization of everyday life. Moreover an actor may be consciously oriented to a phenomenon without being able to formulate the object of orientation in so many words. Garfinkel uses the term ‘seen but unnoticed’ to refer to orientation without conscious awareness to aspects of social organization.

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1 I would like to thank Tom Wilson for his valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2 The significance of *Studies in Ethnomethodology* was clearly recognized by the allocation of a three-part review symposium to it by the *American Sociological Review* (see Swanson, Wallace and Coleman: 1968).

3 The phrase is Steven Lukes’s (Lukes: 1973, p. 2). The parallels with the reception of Durkheim’s work are surprisingly extensive. Like Durkheimian sociology, ethnomethodology has been critically represented as embodying almost every conceivable political persuasion, as expressing an immense variety of (often diametrically opposed) conceptual standpoints and as advocating conceptions every bit as absurd as that of the ‘group mind’ with which Durkheim was arraigned at the beginning of this century (cf. Lukes: 1973, pp. 2–3, 497ff.).
actions and social structures. This stress on the knowledgability of actors, however, places a new premium on uncovering the ways in which social actors analyse their circumstances and can share an intersubjective understanding of them. Here Garfinkel’s research came to focus on the unavoidably contextual character of ordinary understandings and with this focus came an appreciation of the extraordinarily complex and detailed ways in which the contexts of events furnish resources for their interpretation.

The new approach additionally required that the analyses of action and knowledge be fully integrated with one another. This integration was achieved by Garfinkel’s replacement of the prevailing motivational approach to the analysis of social action with a procedural approach to the topic and was programmatically summarized in his primary recommendation that ‘the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings “accountable”’ (Garfinkel: 1984a, p. 1). From this basis, it became possible to address the practices and process of specific social institutions in a new way and to open up new attitudes to processes of linguistic communication. And, still more broadly, it became possible to gain a new understanding and treatment of people’s subscription to, and grasp of, the socially accountable realities in which they are enmeshed.

It is these topics which have provided a substantial measure of the substance of the work done by Garfinkel and his collaborators. The results of this work constitute a most profound and challenging re-orientation of these fundamental aspects of sociological theory and one, moreover, which has issued in a strong programme of empirical inquiry. The aim of this chapter is to situate Garfinkel’s theoretical researches by references to the context of social theory out of which they emerged, to give an account of the main ways in which his thinking has led to a reconceptualization of the nature of social action and social organization and to outline some of the main kinds of empirical research that have emerged as a result of his initiatives.

Re-thinking the Theory of Action

Between 1946 and 1952 Garfinkel trained as a sociologist under the supervision of Talcott Parsons. In 1946 Parsons had assumed the chair of the newly formed Department of Social Relations at Harvard University and his leadership stimulated a concerted effort to forward the development of systematic sociological theory. The goal was to link the disciplines of psychology, sociology and anthropology within a single overarching theoretical framework which had been sketched out in The Structure of Social Action (Parsons: 1937) as the ‘voluntaristic theory of action’. The results of this effort were to be highly influential. Notwithstanding piecemeal criticisms of

the Parsonian theoretical edifice, it came to dominate English-speaking sociological theory for the two decades following the Second World War. It was in this highly-charged theoretical atmosphere that Garfinkel developed a critique of the new theoretical framework at the very moment it was emerging from the Harvard department. The critique struck at the deepest presuppositions of the Parsonian corpus and has, in effect, taken nearly thirty years to surface in contemporary discussions of social theory.

The Parsonian theory of action which Garfinkel encountered during his years at Harvard was essentially a theory of the motivation of action and was dominated by two fundamental preoccupations. The first is that human life is not to be understood as merely a matter of passive adaptation to environmental pressures. On the contrary, it is a central feature of human society and history that ordinary men and women engage in costly striving to realize goals – often of a non-material kind – in the face of powerful obstacles. This first preoccupation – Parsons’s ‘voluntaristic metaphysic’ (Proctor: 1978; Scott: 1963) – is one which stresses the subjective direction of effort in the pursuit of normatively-valued ends. Parsons’s second preoccupation was derived from Hobbes’s famous discussion of chaos in the ‘state of nature’. The Hobbesian ‘problem of order’, as Parsons formulated it, raises the question of how the active strivings of social actors can be reconciled with one another in such a way that social relations will not be dominated by the exercise of force and fraud (Parsons: 1937, p. 92). In theoretical terms, then, the motivational question which dominates the Parsonian theory of action is how to allow for social actors who actively pursue a range of ends while simultaneously providing for a mechanism that avoids the problem of order posed by Hobbes.

As is well known, Parsons’s solution, although expressed as the outcome of the famous ‘convergence’ among the European social theorists, was essentially derived from Durkheim. It embodied the proposal that moral values which are internalized during the course of socialization can exert a powerful influence both on the ends of action and on the means by which these ends are sought. To the extent to which these values are institutionalized within a society – ultimately, in the form of a central value system – social cohesion will emerge in the sharing of goals and expectations and hence as patterns of coordinated activity.\footnote{As Parsons and Shils put it in 1951, ‘institutionalization itself must be regarded as the fundamental integrative mechanism of social systems. It is through internalization of common patterns of value orientation that a system of social interaction can be stabilized (Parsons and Shils: 1951, p. 150).}

These proposals were fleshed out, in subsequent publications from the Harvard department, with the now-familiar tripartite analytical division of social organization into cultural, social and personality systems; the conception of institutional role requirements specified in terms of the ‘pattern variables’; the internalization of values as the motivating ‘need-dispositions'
of the personality system; and the famous discussion of the 'double contingency' of social interaction with its 'two-fold binding-in processes'.

It is striking that, while critics have argued variously that Parsons tended to over-estimate the extent to which normative consensus is an empirical characteristic of societies (Dahrendorf: 1958; Gouldner: 1970), that social integration is not to be confused with system integration (Lockwood: 1964) and that other motivational factors should be given more weight in the analysis of social action (Wrong: 1961), the basic emphasis of Parsonian theory on the motivational aspects of action has remained virtually unchallenged. Yet Parsons had emphasized motivational issues virtually to the exclusion of any concern with the understandings in terms of which social actors coordinate their actions and guide them over their course. In this critical sense, Parsons had failed to construct a theory of action at all but had, instead, constructed only a theory of dispositions to act. Central to any genuine analysis of social action is a conceptualization of the knowledge which the actors bring to bear on their circumstances. This requires solutions to questions concerning the nature and properties of the knowledge which it is appropriate to attribute to social actors, and of how that knowledge is employed by them and is to be analytically treated within the theory of action. And it was on these crucial issues that Garfinkel came, during the immediate post-war period, to depart from the Parsonian viewpoint in a most fundamental way.

In Parsons's writings, the issue of the actor's knowledge is generally given relatively little emphasis but it none the less exerts a profound underlying influence on his theorizing through the medium of his discussion of rationality. For Parsons, the actor's rationality is determined by assessing the extent to which the actor's actions are based on the application of a knowledge base which is compatible with scientific knowledge (Parsons: 1937, p. 58). Where such compatibility is present, the action will be judged as 'intrinsically rational' and the actor's explanation of the action - in being consistent with a scientific explanation of it - must necessarily be counted as scientifically adequate.

7 As Parsons summarized the overall claim, 'the integration of a set of common value patterns with the internalized need-disposition structure of the constituent personalities is the core phenomenon of the dynamics of social systems. That the stability of any system except the most evanescent interaction process is dependent on a degree of such integration may be said to be the fundamental dynamic theorem of sociology' (Parsons: 1951, p. 42).

8 In part, this was because the theory united major strands of the styles of sociological and psychological theorizing which have prevailed well into the post-war period. Indeed Parsons repeatedly noted the convergence of Durkheim and Freud on the phenomenon of internalization in support of his claims.

9 This position has also recently been strongly urged by Giddens (see, e.g., Giddens: 1979, pp. 253-4).

10 Cf. Garfinkel (1952, pp. 91ff; 1984h) and Heritage (1984a, pp. 22-33) for discussion of this issue.

In the majority of cases, however, actors' explanations of their actions will not coincide with the scientist's and in these cases, Parsons proposes, the actors' explanations may be discounted. In these instances a scientific explanation of the actors' actions will be couched in terms of the motivating role of internalized norms and values. A radical gulf is thus created between rational actions with their self-subsistent reasons and non-rational actions in which the actors' reasoning is discounted in favour of causal normative explanations of conduct. This gulf is compounded by Parsons's repeatedly expressed view (e.g. Parsons: 1937, pp. 403-5; 1951, p. 37) that, if moral values are to be an effective prophylactic against Hobbesian chaos, the members of a social order will not be capable of an instrumental orientation toward the normative elements which they have internalized. For such an orientation could give rise to Machiavellian calculation which, if generalized, would undermine the moral constitution of society and leave social order dependent on unstable coalitions of interest. The cumulative effect of these provisions was to marginalize the knowability of social actors to a remarkable degree and to treat the actors, in Garfinkel's memorable phrase, as 'judgemental dopes' (Garfinkel: 1984, p. 68) whose understanding and reasoning in concrete situations of action are irrelevant to an analytical approach to social action.

In developing an alternative to Parsons's approach to the analysis of social action, Garfinkel drew extensively on the work of Alfred Schutz who, in a long series of theoretical writings, had created an unanswerable case for the inclusion of a treatment of the actors' knowledge within the theory of action. From his earliest writings, Schutz had stressed that the social world is interpreted in terms of common-sense categories and constructs which are largely social in origin. These constructs are the resources with which social actors interpret their situations of action, grasp the intentions and motivations of others, achieve intersubjective understandings and co-

11 Garfinkel's (1952) critique of the Parsonian framework began from the theory of knowledge on which it was based. Parsons, he argued, had founded his analysis on a neo-Kantian epistemological framework ('analytic realism' - Parsons: 1937, pp. 730ff) premised on the assumption that accurate knowledge of the external world is gained by the application of the logico-empirical canons of scientific inquiry through a process of successive approximation. The theory implies that successful social action is based on accurate knowledge and therefore obliges its proponents to account for the persistence of inadequate knowledge and non-rational action in a social world in which, ex hypothesi, the actors would be more successful if they adopted a more scientific standpoint. The voluntaristic theory, of course, met this requirement with a causal explanation of 'non-rational' actions couched, inter alia, in terms of normative dispositions. Two consequences flowed from this neo-Kantian conceptualization of knowledge. First, scientific rationality is treated as the fundamental standard in terms of which actors' knowledge and judgements are to be evaluated and, second, the intrinsic properties of the actors' 'non-rational' judgements can be ignored in favour of attempts to give causal explanations of how such 'non-rational' actions are persistently undertaken notwithstanding their deficiencies.
ordinated actions and, more generally, navigate the social world. Their contents and properties plainly require systematic investigation at both the theoretical and the empirical level. Indeed, Schutz asserted, the contents and properties of these constructs cannot be bypassed without the loss of the basic foundations of social theory – its reference to the social world of everyday life and experience which is the only ultimate guarantee that ‘the world of social reality will not be replaced by a fictional non-existing world created by the scientific observer’ (Schutz: 1964a, p. 8).

At the theoretical level, Schutz had set out a number of important properties of common-sense knowledge and cognition. First, the world of everyday life is one which is permeated by what Schutz terms the ‘*époché* of the natural attitude’ (Schutz: 1962c, p. 229). In ordinary life, there is a general suspension of doubt that things might not be as they seem or that past experience may not be a reliable guide to the present. The objectivity and typicality of ordinary objects and events is grasped on a taken-for-granted basis. Second, Schutz proposed that the objects to which the actor orients are actively constituted in the stream of experience through a series of subjective operations. Of particular significance in this context is the notion that the construction (or constitution) of both natural and social objects is necessarily continuously updated through endlessly renewed ‘syntheses of identification’. It is in this way that objects are stabilized as ‘self-same’ objects despite changes in the physical perspectives from which they are viewed and, in the case of animate objects, despite their changing shapes and varied behavioural manifestations.

Third, Schutz argued that all the objects of the social world are constituted within a framework of ‘familiarity and pre-acquaintanceship’ (Schutz: 1962a, p. 7) supplied by a ‘stock of knowledge at hand’ which is overwhelmingly social in origin. Fourth, this stock of social constructs is held in typified form (1962a, p. 7). The typified knowledge in terms of which actors analyse the social world is approximate and revisable but, within the attitude of everyday life in which the constructs serve as pragmatic resources for the organization of action, any general doubt as to their validity and usefulness remains suspended. Finally, Schutz proposed that intersubjective understanding between actors is achieved through an active process in which the participants assume ‘the general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives’ (1962a, pp. 11–13), i.e. that notwithstanding the different perspectives, biographies and motivations which lead to the actors having non-identical experiences of the world, they can none the less treat their experiences as ‘identical for all practical purposes’.

To this account of the properties of common-sense knowledge, Schutz added the important rider that common-sense knowledge is organized as a highly uneven patchwork in which ‘clear and distinct experiences are intermingled with vague conjectures; suppositions and prejudices cross well-proven evidences; motives, means and ends, as well as causes and effects, are strung together without clear understanding of their real connections’ and ‘nowhere have we a guarantee of the reliability of all these assumptions by which we are governed’ (Schutz: 1964b, pp. 72–3). There is little comparison between the characteristic features of scientific and common-sense knowledge. Schutz argues, and ideally-rational actions are not to be sought for in the common-sense world in which, indeed, ‘actions are at best partially rational and that rationality has many degrees’ (1962a, p. 3).

Explicitly developing this analysis, Garfinkel proposed that, if mundane social actions were premised on the characteristic features of scientific rationality, the result would not be successful activity but, rather, inactivity, disorganization and anomie (Garfinkel: 1952; 1984, pp. 270–1). A scientifically adequate orientation to the events of the social world is thus far from being an ideal strategy for dealing with the flow of ordinary events. Its imposition as a standard with which to evaluate actors’ judgements is therefore wholly unwarranted and, Garfinkel insisted, it is both unnecessary and inhibiting in analysing the properties of practical action (Garfinkel: 1984, pp. 280–1). Moreover, if ideal conceptions of rational action are dropped from the picture, the way is open to begin investigations based on the properties of the actor’s actual knowledge in the making of reasonable choices among courses of action, i.e. ‘the operations of judgement, choice, assessment of outcomes, and so on that he does in fact employ’ (Garfinkel: 1952, p. 117).

With this last proposal, Garfinkel established a new territory for sociological analysis: the study of properties of practical common-sense reasoning in mundane situations of action. Moreover the proposal embodied a rejection of the use of scientific rationality as a central point of comparison in the analysis of mundane reasoning. Yet the programme of study that would issue from this proposal was by no means self-evident. Previous models of social action from the utilitarians onwards had routinely used the properties of scientific knowledge and activity as the basis from which to portray the extent to which daily life departed from these features. Devoid of such a comparative yardstick, how were the properties of common-sense knowledge and action to be described?

Garfinkel approached the problem with a variation on the phenomenological procedure of ‘bracketing’ (cf. Psathas: 1980; Schutz: 1962b). Rather than beginning with a privileged version of social structure to which the participants are treated as orienting with various degrees of error, this procedure involves the analyst in suspending any and all commitments to privileged versions of social structure – including the versions held by both the analyst and the participants – in favour of studying how the participants create, assemble, produce and reproduce the social structures to which they orient. This is the famous policy of ‘ethnomethodological indiffERENCE’ (Garfinkel and Sacks: 1970) which has created such misunderstanding and argument. At bottom, it simply involves studying the systematic properties of practical reasoning and practical action while refraining from judgements which have the effect of endorsing or undermining them. Within the ‘brackets’ the practical activities and their properties are examined with as few
presuppositions, and as dispassionately, as possible.12

Projected within these brackets, the concrete investigations reported in Studies in Ethnomethodology (1984) contain two main avenues of approach to the study of practical reasoning and action. First, with the breaching experiments, Garfinkel developed Schutz’s proposal that social actors must assume the ‘general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives’ into a series of investigations into how the mutual intelligibility of ordinary activity is achieved and maintained. Second, he devised a range of demonstrations of the role of common-sense knowledge in the achievement of ordinary understandings of actions, events and artifacts. This knowledge was shown to be highly complex, to draw upon contextual resources which bear immensely varied relations to the focal matters they illuminate, to be unavoidably relied upon as a resource and to be strongly ‘trusted’ as such.

Thus the issue which Garfinkel made empirically problematic is the fact that the actors somehow know what they are doing and know it in common with one another. Garfinkel’s empirical researches into the properties of ordinary actions and ordinary understandings were thus begun in the midst of the events of action. Granted that there is an order of events to be found, the question becomes that of ‘how men, isolated yet simultaneously in an odd communion, go about the business of constructing, testing, maintaining, altering, validating, questioning, defining an order together’ (Garfinkel: 1952, p. 114). It was this new ‘cognitive problem of order’, construed as a constituent feature of the analysis of social action, which Garfinkel set about researching and which is fundamental to the inception of ethnomethodology.

Investigating the Properties of Practical Actions: The Breaching Experiments

In beginning his investigations of the properties of common-sense knowledge and action, Garfinkel argued that the social actor responds ‘not only to the perceived behaviour, feelings, motives, relationships and other socially organized features of life around him’ but also to the ‘perceived normality of these events’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 188).13 However, his approach to the latter did not commence with an attempt to characterize the subjective outlooks of social actors.14 Rather, he began from the assumption that the ‘perceived normality’ of social events can be investigated from the ‘outside’ by experimental manipulations of sequences of actions. Such manipulations could be used to determine the conditions under which events can be treated as perceived normally and to locate procedures by which social actors might seek to ‘normalize’ discrepancies between expected and actual events. In practical terms, this meant starting with an established context of interaction and seeing what could be done to disrupt it. As Garfinkel later summarized the rationale for this procedure,

the operations that one would have to perform in order to multiply the senseless features of perceived environments; to produce and sustain bewilderment, consternation and confusion; to produce the socially structured affects of anxiety, shame, guilt and indignation should tell us something about how the structures of everyday activities are ordinarily and routinely produced and maintained. (Garfinkel: 1984b, pp. 37-8)

The outcome of this approach took the form of a long series of ingenious and variegated breaching experiments (Garfinkel: 1952; 1963; 1984b).

In the published studies, Garfinkel began by considering the case of games. Games, he observed, have a set of basic rules which define the range of legally-possible game events. A set of basic rules is constitutive of a game in that modifications of the set modify the identity of the game that is being played. Knowledge of the rules and the presumption of their reciprocally binding character allow each player to use the rules ‘as a scheme for recognizing and interpreting the other players’ as well as his own behavioral displays as events of game conduct’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 190). Thus in a context of ‘trust’ in which the players take the basic rules of the game for granted as a definition of the situation and of their relationship to other players (1963, pp. 193-4),

the basic rules provide a behavior’s sense as an action. They are the terms in which a player decides whether or not he has correctly identified ‘What happened.’ ‘Subjective meaning’ is ‘attached’ to a behavior in terms of these rules. (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 195)

Given these features, games are relatively easy to disrupt and Garfinkel

12 While the policy as expressed amounts to a clear statement of good scientific procedure, it may not be easy to carry out. It may be difficult to remain detached from the common-sense beliefs and presuppositions which analysts necessarily share with other social participants and to avoid making judgements about the rationality of other social actors. Moreover the social sciences are replete with theoretical systems the terms of which intrinsically embody such beliefs and judgements and it is in this latter context that the radicalism of Garfinkel’s procedure manifests itself.

13 Garfinkel defined the ‘perceived normality’ of events by reference to the following features: ‘the perceived formal features that envoirning events have for the perceiver as instances of a class of events, i.e. typicality; their ‘chances’ of occurrence, i.e. likelihood; their comparability with past or future events; the conditions of their occurrences, i.e. causal texture; their place in a set of means-ends relationships, i.e.

14 As Garfinkel puts its, ‘I shall exercise a theorist’s preference and say that meaningful events are entirely and exclusively events in a person’s behavioral environment … Hence there is no reason to look under the skull since nothing of interest is to be found there except brains. The ‘skin’ of the person will be left intact. Instead questions will be narrowed to the operations that can be performed upon events that are ‘scenic’ to the person’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 190).
reports an exercise in which the game of ‘tick-tack-toe’ (British ‘noughts and crosses’) was breached by experimenters who, having asked the subject to make the first move, erased the mark, moved it to another cell and then made their own move while avoiding any indication that something unusual was being done. In over 250 trials, 95 per cent of the experimental subjects evinced some reaction to this behaviour and over 75 per cent actively objected to it or demanded an explanation of it. The experiment showed decisively that the discrepant behaviours motivated immediate attempts at normalization. Most significantly, it also showed that those who sought to normalize the discrepancy by altering the framework in terms of which the events were understood, for example by assuming that the experiment was intended as a joke or as the initiation of a new game, evinced the least disturbance. By contrast, those who sought to normalize the event while holding fast to the original rules of the game as a constitutive order of events showed most disturbance. Thus the interpretative frameworks which were used in order to determine ‘what had occurred’ had a dramatic impact on the actions and the sentiments of the participants.

However, while it is relatively easy to describe and breach the understandings which are constitutive of games, it is less easy to translate the exercise into the realm of ordinary social action. In pursuit of this latter goal, Garfinkel drew extensively on Schutz’s analysis of the constitutive expectancies of everyday life (see esp. Garfinkel: 1963, pp. 209–17; 1964b, pp. 53–65). In particular, he sought to show that actions which breached the fundamental presupposition of the reciprocity of perspectives would result in the kind of bewilderment, anger and vigorous attempts to restore the situation that were found in the experiments with games. The procedure he adopted was to have experimenters insist that their co-interactants clarify the sense of their commonplace remarks without giving any indication that anything unusual was going on. The results of this procedure were spectacular and have become so widely known that one simple protocol will serve to illustrate the kind of outcome that emerged:

The subject was telling the experimenter, a member of the subject’s car pool, about having had a flat tyre while going to work the previous day.
S: ‘I had a flat tyre.’
E: ‘What do you mean, you had a flat tyre?’
She appeared momentarily stunned. Then she answered in a hostile way: ‘What do you mean “What do you mean?” A flat tyre is a flat tyre. That is what I meant. Nothing special. What a crazy question!’ (Garfinkel: 1964b, p. 42)

In many other cases, subjects responded to the breaching moves with this kind of anger or, alternatively, with requests for explanations of the experimenters’ behaviour, with attempts to interpret the breaching moves as jokes and, in one of the reproduced protocols, with inactivity.

In both the experiments with games and in real settings, the ‘perceived normality’ of events was made seriously problematic and, in both cases, this was done through an undermining of ‘a set of “more fundamental” presuppositions in terms of which behavioral instances are attended by actors as instances of intended actions that a group member assumes “anyone can see”’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 198). Thus the observations about games could be generalized to a considerable extent:

When the work with games was begun, we took for granted that the omnirrelevance of normative regulation was peculiar to games . . . When, however, incongruity-inducing procedures were applied in ‘real life’ situations, it was unnerving to find the seeming endless variety of events that lent themselves to the production of really nasty surprises. These events ranged from those that, according to sociological commonsense, were ‘critical’, like standing very, very close to a person while otherwise maintaining an innocuous conversation, to others that according to sociological commonsense were ‘trivial’, like saying ‘hello’ at the termination of a conversation . . . It was conjectured therefore that all actions as perceived events may have a constitutive structure, and that perhaps it is the threat to the normative order of events as such that is the critical variable in evoking indignation. (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 198)

The implications of these observations are very great. If all actions can be analysed in terms of their constitutive structures and the latter are visible – even if in a ‘seen but unnoticed’ fashion – in the organization of action itself, then the way lies open to a detailed structural analysis of that organization. And this way will not centre on the motivations of social actions but, rather, on the procedural bases through which they are produced and understood – the ways in which the actions themselves betray their own analysability. And, in such a context, the motivations and other ‘subjective’ factors which are ordinarily understood to lie behind actions can, when analysed from a social scientific perspective, be understood as available to the actors by virtue of a combination of contextual knowledge and their tacit grasp of the procedural structure of their own activities.

Investigating the Analysability of Action

In spite of the range of discussions of ‘context’ which occupy the pages of Studies in Ethnomethodology, it is still easy to lose sight of the extent to which the contextuality of ordinary actions is demonstrated to be a crucial resource through which they are understood. For example, in an introductory dis-

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15 Garfinkel describes various important differences between game and ‘real life’ situations (Garfinkel: 1963, pp. 206–9).
cussion of how a husband and wife made sense of a conversation, Garfinkel noted the extent to which each interpreted the utterances of the other by reference to their place in a serial order and by imputing a background of matters that were assumed to be known in common (Garfinkel: 1984b, pp. 38–42). In a procedure in which students were asked to spend time in their homes viewing events from the perspective of boarders, Garfinkel reported that, under this instruction, the students deleted the familiar, biographically-furnished assumptions in terms of which family members and their activities were normally described. In consequence, almost all the students ‘behaviourised’ their reports of the family scenes. In the course of practising their new mode of observation, they became uncomfortably aware of the precise details of behaviour and also of ‘quarrelling, bickering and hostile motivations’ which, they generally asserted, did not represent a ‘true’ picture of the family. Many of the students reported being relieved to restore the normal texture of background understandings to their interpretation of events (Garfinkel: 1984b, pp. 44–9). Here the deletion of a set of contextual assumptions radically altered the way in which events were perceived and reported.

In other contexts, the relevance of ‘background knowledge’ was just as critical in interpreting the nature of events and actions. In a study based on special clinic records designed to develop a model of a psychiatric clinic’s procedures for treating outpatients, Garfinkel found that the coders of the raw records were assuming contextual knowledge of the clinic’s procedures in order to facilitate the coding process in this case, the ‘contextual knowledge’ being invoked comprised assumptions about the clinic’s procedures – the very phenomena which the study was designed to determine. These assumptions, Garfinkel stresses, were not invoked to resolve ambiguities in the records. Instead,

such presupposed knowledge seemed necessary and was most deliberately consulted whenever, for whatever reasons, the coders needed to be satisfied that they had coded ‘what really happened’. This was so regardless of whether or not they had encountered ‘ambiguous’ folder contents. (Garfinkel: 1984a, p. 20)

In these and other investigations which Garfinkel reports, the contextuality of actions and events is always an imputed contextuality and its imputation is, in turn, a key element in making sense of the actions, i.e. of their accountability. But if the invoking of contextual matters is inevitably part and parcel of the sense that is made of events, how are contextual matters invoked?

In his essay ‘Commonsense Knowledge of Social Structures’ (Garfinkel: 1984c), Garfinkel elaborated a major process which, he proposed, is implanted in many aspects of the interpretation of action. Following Mannheim (1952), he termed this process ‘the documentary method of interpretation’ and observed that

the method consists of treating an actual appearance as ‘the document of’, as ‘pointing to’, as ‘standing on behalf of’ a presupposed underlying pattern. Not only is the underlying pattern derived from its individual documentary evidences, but the individual documentary evidences, in their turn, are interpreted on the basis of ‘what is known’ about the underlying pattern. Each is used to elaborate the other. (Garfinkel: 1984c, p. 78)

This process, whose workings are readily apparent, for example, in the interpretation of gestalt figures, is also involved, Garfinkel observes, in recognizing such common occurrences and objects as mailmen, friendly gestures and promises’ (1984c, p. 78).

Garfinkel developed his discussion of the documentary method in the context of a study which was designed to exaggerate its features. Students were invited to participate in a novel form of counselling. Its procedure involved the separation of student and counsellor in adjoining rooms connected by intercom. The student was required to outline the background of the problem for which advice was being sought and then to pose a series of questions which could be answered in a ‘yes/no’ fashion. In between each question and its answer, the subject was asked to disconnect the intercom and tape-record his or her reflections on what had been said. At the end of the exchanges the subjects were asked to give their impressions of them and were subsequently interviewed. Unknown to the subjects, the ‘counsellors’ responses to their questions were determined through a table of random numbers and the experiment had been devised to see how they made sense of responses having, on the face of it, a merely random consistency. 18

In his discussion of the events of this study, Garfinkel stresses the extent to which the subjects were able to complete the exchange and to summarize and evaluate the ‘advice they had been given’ (Garfinkel: 1984c, pp. 89–94). Notwithstanding the randomness of the advisers’ responses, the students did not treat them as such. Instead, they viewed the responses of the advisers as motivated by the questions and found that they could see ‘what the adviser had in mind’. The subjects located the content of the ‘advice’ they received by examining particular contents of their own questions and elaborating those contents over a series of exchanges so as to secure and maintain, as far as was possible, a consistent pattern of ‘advice’. They interpreted the meaning of the ‘advice’ by reference to their own commonsense knowledge of various aspects of normatively-valued collectivity memberships – knowledge which they presupposed was held in common with the adviser. Moreover they evaluated the advice as ‘reasonable’ or ‘unreasonable'
through a procedure of assigning ‘perceivedly normal values’ (see note 13) to what the advisers proposed.

Above all, the subjects devoted considerable efforts to maintaining the interaction as one involving a pattern of advice-giving. To this end, both the ‘pattern of advice’ and the ‘underlying problem to which it was directed’ were repeatedly accommodated to each present answer ‘so as to maintain the “course of advice”, to elaborate what had “really been advised” previously, and to motivate the new possibilities as emerging features of the problem’ (1984c, pp. 89–94). In dealing with incomplete, inappropriate or contradictory answers, the subjects often elected to wait and see if later answers would clarify the situation, or ‘found a reason’ that ‘made good sense’ of the response, or they concluded that the adviser had ‘changed his mind’ or ‘learned something new’ between responses, that he was insufficiently acquainted with the details of the problem, or that the question was badly put, etc. In short, the subjects used every means at their disposal, ad hoc, so as to maintain a commitment to the exchanges as a course of advice involving the participation of trustworthy and properly-motivated advisers.

Several conclusions can readily be drawn from this study. The first is simply to acknowledge the enormous range of presuppositions, knowledge elements, inferences and contextual features that were used as resources to maintain a consistent sense of the central events of the exchanges. While the term ‘the documentary method of interpretation’ identifies a general process of understanding, it is salutary to recognize that an indefinitely large range of matters are girt to its processual mill. Relatedly, it is clear that at any given stage in the proceedings the subjects’ understandings of what was going on were provisional, ‘loose’ and subject to revision. Although they were based both on the application of detailed knowledge and on the use of inferences which operated ‘in detail’ over the particulars of the exchanges, the subjects’ inferences could not be interpreted as the products of clear-cut rules or algorithms unambiguously applied. Garfinkel has repeatedly shown that the application of rules invariably involves the use of ad hoc devices, such as ‘unless’, ‘ect’, and ‘let it pass’, and undoubtedly these devices were implemented in the subjects’ interpretations of their ‘counselling’ sessions. Finally it is worth noting once again the extent to which presupposed ‘underlying patterns’ (i.e. that the exchanges involved ‘counselling’ and were intelligible as such) were repeatedly and extendedly given the benefit of the doubt despite the existence of appearances that argued to the contrary. In accordance with Schutz’s account of the ‘natural attitude’, the participants did indeed suspend for as long as possible any emerging doubts they may have entertained about the character of the exchanges.

With these observations made, however, there is also an important sense

in which the results of the ‘student counselling’ experiment stand in a strikingly paradoxical relation with the results of the ‘breaching’ experiments discussed in the previous section. The subjects of the counselling experiment persisted in the belief that they were getting realistic ‘counselling’ and were exceptionally ingenious in invoking ad hoc considerations to sustain this sense of what was going on. By contrast, the subjects of the breaching experiments very rapidly abandoned any attempt to make sense of what was going on and instead responded almost immediately with outrage and hostility to the actions of the experimenters.

The clue to these two alternative responses appears to lie in the extent to which the subjects were able to interpret the experimenters’ behaviour as intelligible and reasonable. As long as the experimenters produced behaviour that could be procedurally fitted to the context in which it occurred, the subjects were prepared to respond on the basis of ‘trust’ and let it pass on a reading that would ‘make sense’. Once, however, the experimenters produced behaviour which could not be so fitted, the behaviour was immediately sanctioned.

Yet although the subjects were often disconcerted and bewildered during these experiments, it is significant that they did not analyse the behaviour of the ‘breaching’ experimenters as meaningless, random or unmotivated. Garfinkel’s breaching experiments were originally designed, in effect, to immobilize the documentary method of interpretation and create scenes of total inactivity and anomie. In fact, however, they rarely did so. The ‘documentary method’ remained at work and the subjects were able to respond to what was happening to them. Indeed the subjects’ predominantly hostile reactions betrayed their analyses of the experimenters’ behaviour and their motivated by presently undisclosed – though probably disagreeable – intentions.

Garfinkel stresses that all understanding is procedurally or methodically founded. As he puts it, ‘For the conduct of their daily affairs, persons take for granted that what is said will be made out according to methods that the parties use to make out what they are saying for its clear, consistent, coherent, understandable, or planful character, i.e. as subject to some rule’s jurisdiction – in a word, as rational. To see the “sense” of what is said is to accord to what is said its character as a rule. “Shared agreement” refers to various social methods for accomplishing the member’s recognition that something was said according-to-a-rule and not the demonstrable matching of substantive matters. The appropriate image of a common understanding is therefore an operation rather than a common intersection of overlapping sets’ (Garfinkel: 1984a, p. 30).

21 Significantly, the experimenter’s unusual conduct routinely evoked attempts at explanation in terms of motives or intentions which Garfinkel repeatedly documents. For example, (1) in a chess game in which, before making a move, Garfinkel switched the physical positions of identical pieces – e.g. two pawns – thus creating no material change in the state of the game, subjects none the less ‘would speak of the obscurity of my motives’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 199). (2) Similarly, after many of the breaching procedures, both the subjects and the experimenters found it difficult to renormalize their habitual expectations even after the experimental character of
Central, then, to the analysability of action is the phenomenon of procedural trust. The participants enter any situation of action with a set of interpretative procedures which they will use, largely unconsciously, to determine a specific sense for particular, located social actions. But where such sense cannot be achieved, the participants may not necessarily abandon the procedural bases of their understandings. Rather they may use those same procedural bases as the grounds on which to judge social actions as departures from 'normal sensible' behaviour, as negatively motivated and as morally sanctionable. The procedures through which action is interpreted are thus doubly constitutive of the activities they organize. They provide both for the intelligibility of perceived normal conduct and for the visibility of conduct which deviates from this. The interpretative procedures thus have some striking properties. Not only are they capable of flexible implementation so as to permit a range of behaviour to be assimilated into a given underlying pattern, they are also usable to create the visibility of actions that deviate from their dictates as motivated or 'wilful', and hence as meaningful.

In turn this means that the set of interpretative procedures through which action is rendered intelligible have the remarkable property of totally 'covering' the field of action. There is thus no uncategorizable action – even if, at the limits of discussion, some of the more drastic departures from 'perceived normal' behaviour are placed in the residual category of 'insane'. This 'double constitution' property of interpretative procedures has immense significance for the analysis of ordinary social action, to which we now turn.

**Norms and Action: Normative Determination versus Moral Accountability**

Within the major sociological perspectives concerned with the analysis of social action, it has been traditional to treat the occurrence of ordinary actions as rule-governed (Wilson: 1971) or as determined by moral norms and, in this way, to specify the primary mechanism through which collectivi-

dties shape and constrain the activities of their members. In Parsons's influential account of this process, moral norms are internalized to constitute the need-dispositions of individuals in a socialization process which essentially involves conditioning through the administration of rewards and punishments. What is lost in this analysis is any principled approach to the reasoning of ordinary actors in situations of action. The social actor is treated as a 'judgemental dope', i.e.

the man-in-the-sociologist's society who produces the stable features of the society by acting in compliance with pre-established and legitimate alternatives of action that the common culture provides.

And hence

the person's use of commonsense knowledge of social structures over the temporal 'succession' of here and now situations are treated as epiphenomenal. (Garfinkel: 1984b, p. 68)

What is lost by the 'judgemental dope' formulation is a conception of social actors who use their interpretative resources to make out the character of the circumstances in which they find themselves and, as part of that process, determine how possible courses of action will be evaluated relative to the normative order of events in which they are enmeshed. What is lost, in short, is an analysis of social action built in terms of what is central to the participants – the mutual intelligibility and moral accountability of action. Garfinkel's treatment of the role of norms in social action is one which makes them central to both the recognizability and the moral accountability of action. Such a treatment involves a major reconceptualization of traditional conceptions of the role of norms in social activity. None the less once these elements are placed at the centre of the analysis a radically different, but theoretically coherent and empirically fruitful, approach to the analysis of action emerges.

1 The situation of action.

An initial reconceptualization within the theory of action which is required by Garfinkel's results concerns the situation of action itself. In the Parsonian analysis and, more generally, the 'normative paradigm' (Wilson: 1971), shared norms function as stable linkages between situations and the actions which are required under given situational conditions. Essentially 'given situations' – initially recognized by the participants independently of normative considerations – are viewed as calling up specific normative dispositions and expectations which issue in behaviour of a particular kind. The norma-

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22 As Wilson (1971, p. 66) has noted, both conflict and consensus theories have shared this assumption and have primarily disagreed on the extent to which a normative consensus exists and social integration is engendered by the consensus.
tive model of concerted action thus requires not only that the actors have had similar normative training but also that they share common perceptions of the empirical situations in which they are placed. If this latter condition is met, the actors can be treated as placed in contexts which, through the medium of the appropriate norms, are determinative of their joint actions. In this analysis, each situation is treated as discrete and anterior to action and as determining action in a 'container-contained' kind of way. Within this framework, the constitutive role of time in the organization of activity as a temporal sequence is ignored. There is no possibility here of the interpretative role of retrospective-prospective temporal perspectives which, Garfinkel shows, are central to understanding even an elementary conversation (Garfinkel: 1984b, pp. 38–42). And, more generally, the theory tends to treat the temporal relationship between a situation and the actions it generates as occurring within the confines of a single 'fertile moment' (Garfinkel: 1952, p. 147).

But this view of the relationship between an action and its context is quite inconsistent with Garfinkel's findings about the operations of the documentary method of interpretation in ordinary situations of action. For it will be recollected that his findings were that not only does the context of action influence what the action is thought to consist of, but the component actions too contribute to a developing sense of the situation of action itself.24 'Action' and 'context' are mutually elaborative and mutually determinative elements in a simultaneous equation that the actors are continually solving and re-solving to determine the nature of the events in which they are placed. Thus the 'circumstances' of an action cannot properly be analysable as grossly anterior to a subsequent set of actions which they 'enfold'. As the presumptive, but not incorrigible, basis on which actions are both premised and interpreted, the 'circumstances' should, rather, be construed as the developing and transformable products of their constituent actions.

2 The norm-situation link.

A related issue for the analysis of action arises from a consideration of the relationship between the norms by which actions are 'determined' and the situations to which those norms apply. The central problem here is that every situation of action differs - to a greater or lesser extent - from every other and that, in principle therefore, the social world consists of an indefinitely large number of differentiable situations of action.25 But although the normative paradigm works from the presumption of a domain of discrete situations from which actions will be generated through the operation of norms, the model is threatened by the prospect of an indefinitely large array of unique contexts of action.26 It is clear that normative prescriptions do not exist for each situation of action or, if they did, each prescription would lapse from use after a single application. Such an outcome, if it were conceivable, would undermine the very concept of a rule of conduct and would render the sharing of such a rule unimaginable.

But if internalized norms or rules are to be determinative of action across diverse states of affairs, the normative theorist must, as a crucial component in the specification of the theory, be able to identify the domain of situations in which they will apply. Yet it is a commonplace of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of action that the boundaries of such categories are negotiable and revisable through the actors' usages, which are negotiable, rather than deterministic, in character.27 In short, as the legal theorist H. L. A. Hart has observed, 'Particular fact situations do not await us already marked off from each other and labelled as instances of the general rule, the application of which is in question; nor can the rule itself step forward to claim its own instances' (Hart: 1961, p. 123). Instances of the application of rules are decided by the participants in light of the particulars of the situations in which they find themselves. Moreover, given that the situations in which a rule may be applied will vary in specific details, the characteristic sense of the rule's application in each set of circumstances will also differ. It is this issue which, *inter alia*, Garfinkel addresses in his recommended policy of refusing serious consideration to the prevailing proposal that ... rational properties of practical activities be assessed, recognized, categorized, described by using a rule or a standard obtained outside actual settings within which such properties are recognized, used, produced and talked about by settings' members. (Garfinkel: 1984a, p. 33)

Thus in both these problem areas - the domain of actions to which given norms apply and the concrete application of norms to specific situational contexts - there is sufficient slippage to undermine fatally the credibility of normative determinism as a model of action. This does not mean that normative expectations are insignificant in the organization of action. Rather it suggests that their role will have to be reconsidered.

In contrast to the normatively deterministic model of action described above, Garfinkel's researches suggest an alternative analysis which is founded on a notion of the normative accountability of action. Within this viewpoint the actors' normative expectations are treated not as regulative

23 This usage is drawn from Burke (1945).

24 See in particular Garfinkel's analyses of the process by which a simple conversation is understood (Garfinkel: 1984b, pp. 38–42) and of the characteristics of the understandings in the student-counselling experiment (1984c, pp. 89–94).

25 Thus every situation of action is uniquely and, as Sacks (1963) noted, indefinitely describable.

26 For the normative paradigm, the problematic relationship between general moral norms and a diverse set of unique action situations manifests itself as a variation on the problem of universals.

27 See Barnes (1984a, 1984b) for a lucid discussion of some of the issues involved.
or determinative of actions whose recognizability is treated as independent of the norm, but rather as playing a constitutive role in the actors' recognition of what the actions consist of. Thus temporal successions of actions are grasped and portrayed as related to one another by reference primarily to sets of normative expectations. It is through such a medium that a sequence of actions – such as a series of questions and answers – can be rendered 'observable-reportable' or 'accountable', for example, as a classroom lesson. However, for a lesson to observably-reportably occur, a set of actions which are recognizably its 'component activities' must be produced in particular patterned arrangements or sequences. Only if this condition is met can the event be continuously assembled as a recognizable 'lesson' over the temporarily extended course of its production.

Within the event itself, the component actions will be produced by participants who will inevitably have a grasp, if only tacit, of the specific contextual moments in which they should act and of how various possible courses of action will fulfill or disappoint the constitutive expectancies attached to those moments. Each successive action is thus visible – through the norms which are collectively constitutive of 'what a school lesson consists of' – as a maintenance of, or a departure from, the constitutive expectancies of school lessons. Thus the 'situation of action' – the lesson – is most effectively viewed as the presupposition, project and product of its own constituent actions. As Garfinkel puts it, 'the policy is recommended that any social setting be viewed as self-organizing with respect to the intelligible character of its own appearances' (1984a, p. 33). Moreover, each constituent action will be analysed as an establishment, adjustment, restoration, alteration or breach of the 'classroom context' and will be found to have been so analysed in and of its own production or, as Garfinkel puts it, 'reflexively' or 'incarnately'.28 It follows that, even in a setting such as a classroom in which the regulative role of norms or rules of conduct might seem to be self-evident, there is a much more fundamental constitutive role for the norms of classroom activity. This constitutive role is particularly apparent when the norms are breached, and in two ways.

The precise character of such departures from the norm is available in detail from an analysis of their contexts – which will necessarily elaborate their sense as actions. And it is through this detailed analysis that departures can be accountably treated as voluntary or involuntary, as constructive or sanctionable, etc.

3 The binding character of norms.
A central tenet of the Parsonian analysis of normative constraint is that social actors will find it difficult or impossible to maintain a calculative orientation to the norms which they have internalized. Once internalized, norms become need-dispositions of personality which drive action in largely unrationlialized and prescribed ways, and it is this which establishes their binding character.

For Garfinkel, by contrast, normative conventions are primarily to be understood as resources for establishing and maintaining the intelligibility of a field of action. As the breaching experiments showed, regardless of what actions take place the actors will attempt to make sense of them by reference to the norms, and in those cases where the action cannot be held to comply with a normative convention, it can none the less be treated as a departure from it. Such departures can, in turn, be given 'secondarily elaborative' treatments in which particular (often negative) motives and intentions may be invoked to interpret them.30 Moreover normative conventions can, in the breach, be resources for transforming situations of action, redefining the social identities in play within them, etc.

These interpretations, however, generally presume that (contra Parsons) the normative conventions applicable to a situation of action are cognitively available to all concerned and thus that the 'deviant' is generally one who 'should have known better' and 'could have done otherwise'. Conventional notions of responsibility for action (and the sanctionability of action) rest on this presumption. All of these understandings depend upon the actor's capacity to adopt a reflexive and, on occasion, a calculative orientation to normative conventions. Thus in the Garfinkelian account, which places no particular significance on a history of rewards and punishments as a guarantee that social participants will be driven by normative conventions, it may none the less be argued that it is the reflexive anticipation of the analysability and moral accountability of departures from norms which inhibits their production (Garfinkel: 1984c, pp. 66-70). In the cognitive analysis of norms developed by Garfinkel in which normative conventions constitute

28 This point is nicely illustrated in the following observation by Peter French about an infant class. A child who was engaged in looking down a simple microscope was asked by his teacher 'What can you see?' Looking up, the child replied, 'Have a look'. French remarked that all the children in the class he observed had learned to avoid such responses by the third week of their first term in school.
4 The maintenance of normative frameworks.
A final major area in which the Garfinkelian perspective entails a revision of the normatively deterministic approach to the theory of action arises from a consideration of the reproduction or persistence of normative expectations. Notwithstanding the power of Parsons’s discussion of the ‘double contingency’ of interaction and the ‘two-fold binding-in’ of normative expectations, there are surprising lacunae in his account of how norms persist as sources of conduct. For norms represent ideal standards of conduct which actors may, in the nature of things, readily fall short of or depart from. Parsons’s account assumes both internalization and an unmitigated sanctioning process as the basis on which norms are sustained, but his account offers no other elementary processes through which the persistence of norms might be ensured. This is a serious weakness, for, given the ideal character of norms and the rationalizing capabilities of social actors, deviations and delinquencies may often go unsanctioned either by conscience or by the reactions of others. And, to the extent that this is frequently the case, a process in which normative expectations undergo entropic degeneration might be expected. In short, the question arises of how normative standards are maintained as standards under circumstances in which they may be breached relatively frequently and without sanction.

The normative accountability approach to the analysis of action offers an economical solution to this question. It was proposed earlier that, through their property of double constitution, norms are invoked in the recognition of both conforming and deviant actions. Additionally it was noted that, for social actors, while conforming actions are rarely the objects of additional explanation, deviant actions are usually explained through a variety of ‘secondarily elaborative’ accounts which make reference to the circumstances of the action or the character and to the motives or intentions of the doer. Thus in the case of normative expectations, there are only two sets of possibilities. Either the norm is complied with, or deviance from it both triggers and requires an account in terms of some ‘special’ motive or context. In the first case the norm effectively furnishes a self-subsistent explanation for the action. In the second, the norm motivates the search for the special conditions that can explain why it was not met. In either case, the norm is cognitively preserved as the primary interpretative base in terms of which the action, whether conforming or deviant, is understood. Hence norms can stand outside the fall of events and thus be proof against erosion by actions which fall short of or deviate from their dictates.

To grasp this presuppositional and constitutive role of norms in the production and recognition of action is to identify a central source of stability in the reproductive maintenance of social institutions. It is also to recognize the chronic interpenetration between the factual and moral orders that exists within the viewpoint of ordinary actors. The latter are routinely engaged in the moral constitution of social events through a framework of normative expectations which, in seen but unnoticed ways, they ceaselessly maintain as incorrigible.

In sum, the Garfinkelian view of action, which stresses its moral accountability through the medium of normative conventions, is one which departs from the normatively deterministic viewpoint at each of the key points listed above.

1 It avoids reifying the situation of action into a standardized and determining context of activity. As Garfinkel observes,

Social science theorists . . . have used the fact of standardization to conceive the character and consequences of actions that comply with standardized expectancies. Generally they have acknowledged but otherwise neglected the fact that by these same actions persons discover, create and sustain this standardization. (Garfinkel: 1984b, p. 67)

Instead, the situation of action is treated as an essentially transformable context of activity that is unavoidably maintained, altered or restored in and through the courses of action which are conventionally said to occur ‘within it’ but which, more realistically, may be said to constitute and reconstitute it in a continuous process of renewal.

2 The norms through which situations and their component actions are recognized are to be understood not as rigid templates, but as elastic and reversible resources which are adjusted and altered over the course of their application to concrete contexts. In this sense the specific character of ordinary actions is grasped through ‘accommodative work’ (Garfinkel: 1963, p. 187) and is always recognized, as Garfinkel elsewhere puts it, for ‘another first time’ (1984a, p. 9).

3 Rather than treating norms as drivers of behaviour, normative con-

31 The notion that the actor’s anticipation of how conduct will be construed is an important consideration influencing choice among courses of action goes back to C. Wright Mills’s classic ‘Situated Actions and Vocabularies of Motive’ (Mills: 1940). As Garfinkel put the underlying issue in his doctoral dissertation: ‘The big question is not whether actors understand each other or not. The fact is that they do understand each other, that they will understand each other, but the catch is that they will understand each other regardless of how they would be understood’ (Garfinkel: 1952, p. 367).

32 This issue is central to Pollner’s (1974a; forthcoming) analysis of mundane reasoning and to Mulkay and Gilbert’s analysis of error accounts in scientific discourse (see Gilbert and Mulkay: 1984, ch. 4; Mulkay and Gilbert: 1982). See also Heritage (1984a, pp. 209ff) for a more elaborate discussion.
ventions are construed, within the Garfinkelian view, as a major source of the cognitive resources through which settings of action are rendered both intelligible and morally accountable. In particular, they provide for the visibility of both appropriate and deviant behaviour: they provide for the secondary analysability of deviant behaviour in terms of meaning and motive; and reflexive awareness of how deviant behaviour will be analysed can motivate normatively appropriate behaviour. Cognitive awareness of normative frameworks is presumed when social participants treat conduct as intelligible and morally accountable regardless of whether that conduct complies with or departs from norms. The secondary analysability of departures from normative conventions, however, may tend in general to motivate compliant conduct.

4 Normative conventions are treated as presuppositional to the fields of action which they render intelligible and accountable. Their maintenance is, at one and the same time, the presupposition, process and product of their use to interpret ordinary scenes of social activity (cf. Pollner: 1974a). It is this status which gives them immense stability as institutional bases of action that are simultaneously cognitive and moral in character.

Taken together, these considerations represent a major re-orientation of the Parsons conception of action that has prevailed during the post-war era. The new centrality given to the procedural bases of action, the nature of the actors' understandings of the circumstances in which they are located, and the reflexive properties of action has stimulated a great deal of empirical work which has been exploited to shed new light on old problems. Perhaps most importantly, the normative accountability view of human action has proved to be an open and generative source of accumulating insights in the nature of social organization. It has been central in new understandings of the role of language in social action, the nature of intersubjectivity in human conduct, the institutional foundations of the generation and implementation of knowledge, and an increasingly detailed account of the nature of social interaction. It is to these themes that we now turn.

**Language and Accountability**

Garfinkel's proposal that 'the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings account-able' (1984a, p. 1) is not, of course, to be understood as proposing that ordinary descriptive accounts provide unproblematic access to the nature of the activities they describe. Nor is it to be understood as asserting that the analysis of verbal accounts of action can in any way substitute for the analysis of action itself. On the contrary, his use of the term 'account-able' as a synonym for 'observable-reportable' (1984a, p. 1; 1974, p. 17) means that his observation is addressed to the way any setting of activity can be grasped as patterned in and through the unfolding character of its constituent actions, irrespective of whether this patterning is (or even can be) given linguistic formulation. Social actions do not have to be baptised with language for their intelligibility and implicativeness to be available to the participants. Garfinkel often uses the example of queueing to illustrate the ways in which a group of people, simply by standing in a particular spatial relationship to one another, mutely constitute a small-scale social institution and establish sets of expectations and moral obligations vis-à-vis one another.

Granted this inherent or 'incarnate' intelligibility of social activity, what then is the relationship between events and the verbal accounts which bring them to descriptive formulation? In his treatment of accounts, Garfinkel was concerned to get away from the view that descriptive accounts are transparent and thus leave ordinary understandings of the objects and events they depict unaltered by the fact of their having been described. And he also seeks to undermine the view that describing and other forms of speaking are, as it were, inert with respect to the settings in which they occur. Such a notion of description is explicit in theories that stress the representative function of language and the correspondences between words and things, and it is implicit in forms of practical social scientific research that treat the reports of social actors as data which unproblematically index underlying social realities.

Against both of these positions, Garfinkel emphasizes the extent to which ordinary accounts have a 'loose' fit to the circumstances they depict. The nature of the fit between accounts and their circumstances is established through an active course of interpretative work. The rational features of accounts, he asserts, 'consist of what members do with, what they "make of" the accounts in the socially organized actual occasions of their use' (1984a, pp. 3–4). Accounts are thus indexical expressions. They are not to be treated as external to or independent of the contexts in which they are employed.

The term 'indexical expression' has been the object of significant misunderstanding in discussions of ethnomethodology. The term itself derives from the literature of logic and linguistics, where it is used to describe expressions (such as 'he', 'this', 'today', etc.) that require contextual knowledge in order to recover their referents (see Levinson: 1983, pp. 45–96). This origin has been a potent source of confusion in sociological responses to Garfinkel's proposals, and in two main ways. First, it will be apparent that in its logico-linguistic usage, the term has a relatively narrow, technical meaning. In his usage, by contrast, Garfinkel dramatically widened the sense of the term. His proposal is that every use of language without exception is informed by contextual attachments. Thus, even where a sentence is being produced as purely descriptive of a state of affairs, contextual features of the sentence will have to be invoked in order to see that, after all, it is intended as a description and not, for example, as an irony, a joke or a metaphor.

The second source of confusion is closely related to the first. In the logico-
linguistic literature, indexical expressions have attracted interest because, as Garfinkel (1984a, pp. 4–7) notes, they constitute obstacles to the use of fully-formalized analytical techniques in a variety of disciplines. This background has been incorporated into the inappropriate view that ordinary actions are concerned with the problem of 'remedying' indexical expressions (Attewell: 1972; Phillips: 1978). This has led to the creation of an incorrect understanding of the role of language in social relations. For, in contexts of ordinary language-use, social participants clearly explain the indexical characteristics of talk in a wide variety of ways (see, among others, Heritage: 1984a, pp. 142–57; Schegloff: 1984). The indexical properties of accounts are thus a resource rather than an obstacle to sense-making in ordinary social contexts.

The indexical properties of accounts ultimately arise from their character as actions. Accounts are inextricably tied to the occasions of their use, Garfinkel asserts, because the accounts are 'features of the socially organized occasions of their use' (Garfinkel: 1984a, pp. 4–7). Ordinary accountings are thus not 'time out' from actions. They are not the moments at which action ceases and commentary on action takes its place. Nor are accounts disembodied events that stand outside the activities in which they are temporally enmeshed. Rather they are actions in their own right and, like other actions, they evidently contribute to the setting of which they are a part, and, again like other actions, they are interpreted and understood procedurally. Moreover, accounts are contextually interpreted through the reflexively elaborative procedures of the documentary method of interpretation. As Garfinkel and Sacks summarize the position, 'a description, for example, in the ways it may be a constituent part of the circumstances it describes, in endless ways and unavoidably, elaborates those circumstances and is elaborated by them' (Garfinkel and Sacks: 1970, p. 338). Accounts, then, are subject to the same circumstantial and interpretative contingencies as the actions to which they are oriented. For, to repeat, accounts are actions and the important thing about them is that they are used in an immensely varied range of ways to manage ordinary settings of activity. Accounts, therefore, are not a terminus for social scientific investigation, they are, rather, a point of departure for it.

Garfinkel's view of language and social relations is thus one which opens up completely new fields of investigation while raising profound and complex questions about the nature of speech, speaking and other forms of communicative action. Inevitably, this treatment generates more problems than it resolves. This is entirely to the good. The older views of language rendered it as a transparent, unsearchable entity. Garfinkel's observations 'naturalize' language and place the analysis of accounts and accounting practices on a par with the analysis of other forms, of practical action. Within this view, language is understood as a resource through which social participants intervene in action situations, but the 'frameworks' and 'mechanics' through which words are assembled into accounts and these accounts are 'attached' to real-world situations remain open to empirical study. As valuable analyses

of the variety of ways in which ordinary accountings are invoked in the maintenance of social worlds, the reader is recommended to examine Wieder's classic study (1974) of the use of the 'convict code' as an accounting scheme in a 'half-way house' for paroled narcotics addicts and Gilbert and Mulkay's study (1984) of the ways in which scientists depict a contemporary field of biochemical research. Each of these studies, which defy summary in a short essay, readily reveals the gains in sociological insight which can be made from abandoning the traditional representative view of language in investigating forms of social organization.

Dimensions of Empirical Research in Ethnomethodology

1 Social structures as 'normal environments'

One of the first, and most prominent, lines of development deriving from Garfinkel's initiatives focused on typification or normalization as a characteristic of common-sense reasoning and judgement. This focus was, in part, a legacy from the phenomenological writings of Schutz, who had stressed the role of consciousness as a typifying agency and characterized everyday language as 'the typifying medium par excellence' and as a 'treasure house of ready-made preconstituted types' (Schutz: 1962a, p. 14). This theme was taken up and pressed by Cicourel in his discussion of 'normal form typification' as a methodological issue (Cicourel: 1972, pp. 254–6) and is of course thematically embedded in Garfinkel's discussions of 'perceived normality' as a property of cultural objects and events and in his discussions of mundane accountability and the documentary method.

In the empirical analyses which stemmed from the typification theme, the main emphasis of research fell on the underlying assumptions and presuppositions of particular typification frameworks, the concrete procedures and considerations informing the assimilation of objects and events into categories and the roles of such categories in particular social environments. Much of this empirical work emerged in the field of deviance or dealt with related bureaucratic decision-making procedures that are implemented in the 'processing of people'. The superficial affinity with the labelling perspective (Becker: 1963) was considerable, not least because of the large substantive overlap between the two approaches. None the less, the two perspectives differed on two related and critical issues. First, the ethnomethodological studies avoided the nominalistic labelling premiss that deviance was constituted by societal reactions tout court (cf. Pollner: 1974b) and, second, they rejected as over-simple the labelling theorists' concentration on the distinction between the correctly and incorrectly labelled. Instead the ethnomethodological studies focused directly upon the organizational practices and contingencies of the defining process and accepted that normalizing expectations were an irremediable feature of its operation. An early exemplar of this approach was David Sudnow's well-known study, 'Normal Crimes' (1965). Here Sudnow showed in considerable detail
that Californian public lawyers’ common-sense constructs of typical offenders and patterns of offence commission effectively shaped their approaches to plea bargaining and hence substantial aspects of the administration of justice. In particular he showed that the constructs were used to determine the appropriateness of entering into plea-bargaining activities. In interviews with defendants, they were used to epitomize the defendants as ‘cases’ in ways that presupposed their guilt. And these same constructs strongly influenced the type of charge that was finally arrived at in exchange for the ‘guilty’ plea, subject only, Sudnow showed, to a further consideration: the issue of what sentence this type of ‘normal’ offence should get as its ‘due’. The categories of crime which were used by the legal representatives were, to say the least, underdetermined by the legal code. As Sudnow observes,

in their actual use, categories of crime ... are ... the shorthand reference terms for that knowledge of the social structure and its criminal events upon which the task of practically organizing the work of "representation" is premised. That knowledge includes, embodied within what burglary, petty theft, narcotics violations, child molestation and the rest actually stand for, knowledge of modes of criminal activity, ecological characteristics of the community, patterns of daily slam life, psychological and social biographies of offenders, criminal histories and futures. (Sudnow: 1965, p. 275)

Through the use of this knowledge with its routinization and typification of ‘normal crimes’, Sudnow argued, the administration of justice had become subject to a process of informal bureaucratization that was not depicted in the Californian criminal code.

In parallel with Sudnow’s study, a substantial number of ethnomethodological investigations carried out during the 1960s showed that a large and previously unsuspected range of contextual considerations could be invoked in constituting or modifying normal bureaucratic decisions or courses of action. Closely associated with this was the recognition that members of bureaucracies are not only able, but positively obliged, to invoke and interpret bureaucratic rules and procedures in ad hoc ways and that this, in turn, is an important source of discretionary power. The necessity of producing ad hoc interpretations of even very clear-cut rules of procedure was elegantly demonstrated by Zimmerman (1969a) in a study of the activities of receptionists in a state welfare agency. The receptionists, who used a highly specific procedure to allocate a smooth flow of claimants to case officers, were obliged to depart from the procedure under a number of contingencies. In such cases, the receptionists’ actions were defensible and defended by the claim that the objectives of the procedure were more effectively satisfied by departing from it than adhering to it. As Zimmerman put it, ‘the notion of action-in-accord-with-a-rule is a matter not of compliance or non-compliance per se but of the various ways in which persons satisfy themselves and others concerning what is or is not “reasonable” compliance in particular situations’ (1970, p. 23).

In related papers arising from the same research project, Zimmerman disclosed a range of ways in which documented claims and verbal accounts were interpreted through procedures which closely resembled those of Garfinkel’s coders (see p. 236). Like the coders, the case officers were often able, at a glance, to ‘see the system’ in the documentary evidence that formed the basis for claims. When the documents appeared problematic, conceptions of the ‘ways in which the documents could have been produced’ (Zimmerman: 1969a) furnished an open set of resources through which the officials could arrive at determinate and warrantable decisions. Other studies, too, demonstrated the extent to which the processing of people is subject to interpretative practices in which the discretionary invocation of contextual matters can play a crucial role. In the field of education, studies of pupil-counselling (Cicourel and Kitsuse: 1963) and of the application of tests and other courses of treatment (Cicourel et al.: 1974; Leiter: 1976) have documented these processes in substantial measure and Bittner’s work (see esp. Bittner: 1967a) illustrates parallel processes in the work of practical policing.35

While the above studies show the extent and range of ways in which background information characteristically enters into ordinary bureaucratic decision-making, Garfinkel’s famous study “Good” Organizational Reasons for “Bad” Clinic Records’ (1984f) takes the argument a step further. The point of departure for this study was the fact that a preliminary investigation of a psychiatric clinic’s records showed that, while entries were regularly made, they were insufficiently detailed for even quite elementary social scientific uses. This raised the question of why such incomplete, vague and elliptical records should none the less be kept. Garfinkel’s conclusion was that the records were kept as a resource with which to depict relations between the patients and clinic personnel as appropriate fulfils of a ‘therapeutic contract’. The absence of detail, he proposed, served as a

33 See Pollner (1974b) for a critique of the labelling perspective from an ethnomethodological viewpoint. The ethnomethodological conclusion that all procedures for locating deviance are ultimately constituent features of the deviance they thus render accountable was a proximate point of departure for a radical eruption out of ethnomethodology by Alan Blum and Peter McHugh and their associates into a totalizing moral critique of social relations. See McHugh et al. (1974) for a collection of papers and Heritage (1975) for an attempt at appraisal.

34 For a valuable study of the particulars of the plea-bargaining process itself, see Maynard: 1984.

35 The demonstration of related processes across the range of social science procedures has, of course, been a long-term project of Cicourel’s writings from Cicourel (1964) onwards. As Handel (see 1982, pp. 1128f.) has noted, this project is expressed in the two-pronged character of much of Cicourel’s empirical work, which is simultaneously substantive and concerned with the practical social science reasoning underlying the substantive conclusions.
defensive resource by ensuring that the records could only be competently read by entitled personnel who would interpret them in terms of their understandings of typical clinic procedures. The records consisted of ‘a single free field of elements’ whose unavoidable contextualization by reference to typical aspects of clinic practice would inevitably serve to justify the practices and procedures that had been carried out (Garfinkel: 1984f, p. 201). Thus, not only is ‘normalized’ background information a constituent feature of bureaucratic decision-making, but bureaucracies can defend themselves against an unknown range of future difficulties by the production of records which, almost unavoidably, will be defensively exploited through this very fact.

Perhaps the best known of the ethnomethodological studies dealing with organizational processes have been those that cast doubt on the value of official statistics for the conduct of sociological research. Most prominent among these have been Cicourel’s study (1968) of the processing of juvenile offenders and the work by Douglas (1967) and Atkinson (1978) on the investigation of suicide. These writers stressed the extent to which background knowledge enters into the constitution of the judgements that make up the official statistics and argued that studies based on official statistics were likely to recover the assumptions which had been built into the defining process by the legal agencies but were unlikely to recover causal factors that had not already been actively or passively acted upon by the agencies themselves.

Thus in his well-known study of juvenile justice, Cicourel showed that the officials concerned associated juvenile delinquency with marriage breakdown in the offenders’ homes. It was assumed that offenders from broken homes, lacking parental guidance and correction, would be likely to commit more serious offences in the future. In accordance with this assumption, juvenile offences committed by children from broken homes were treated more seriously than similar offences by children from ‘two-parent families’. This differential treatment was apparent in a variety of statistics dealing with each stage of the law-enforcement process. Offences by children from broken homes appeared more often in official reports, were more commonly dealt with by the courts and were more commonly given custodial sentences.

It is clear that if the disposition of juvenile cases is strongly influenced by such presumptions which thereby become built into the crime statistics, the statistics of ‘juvenile crime’ cannot be a valid resource with which to pursue social scientific objectives. For the statistics will not give a representative depiction of the incidence of juvenile crime and cannot be used to assess the role of social characteristics (such as broken homes) as causal factors in crime-generation.

Cicourel proposed that internal police records are also of dubious social scientific value. Having studied the processes through which the officials concerned created dossiers on their juvenile subjects, Cicourel argued, drawing on Shibutani’s studies (1966) of rumour, that such dossiers embodied a process of progressive typification in which case details became more concise, selective and consistent with the assumptions and objectives of the law-enforcement agencies.

In the case of both sets of information – the statistics and the dossiers – Cicourel concluded that a circular process was occurring in which fundamental presumptions about juveniles were being built into the records which, in turn, were being used to argue for the validity of the presumptions. A rather similar conclusion was arrived at by Douglas (1967) and Atkinson (1978) with respect to the interpretation of suicide statistics. Thus Douglas proposed that the kinds of sociological factors normally used to explain the variations in suicide rates may themselves influence the social processes through which deaths come to be recorded as suicides (Douglas: 1967, pp. 163–231). In particular, he argued that social integration will be positively associated with attempts to conceal suicide which, to the extent that they are successful, will influence the measurement of suicide rates.

Atkinson’s study focused on the role of British coroners and their officers in the investigative process. He found that the officials concerned with the certification of death have relatively well-defined conceptions of ‘typical suicides’, ‘typical suicidal biographies’, and that such factors as the mode of death and the dead person’s immediate life circumstances formed the material out of which formulaic ‘recipe knowledge’ of forms of suicide was constructed. These conceptions, which embrace and, in some cases, closely resemble social scientific hypotheses on the causation of suicide, are subsequently built into the suicide statistics through the investigative procedures of coroners and their officials. Thus studies of official suicide statistics, Atkinson proposes, are inevitably – if unknowingly – engaged in decoding the common-sense theories of suicide which were constitutive in the recognition of individual cases and hence, cumulatively, in the statistics as a whole.

All of the work described in this section has focused on the normalizing and typifying processes which are characteristic of organizational activity in all its variety. Notwithstanding the controversial nature of the last-mentioned studies, it would be a mistake to conclude, as some have done, that the work described in this section has only a methodological relevance, and a negative one at that. The work on normalization was undertaken in the wake of Garfinkel’s proposal that the ‘perceived normality’ of social events is the product of active work. The application of this notion to organizational processes has not only confirmed the original insight. It has also given rise to new levels of understanding that have positively informed a wide range of sociological investigations, including many which are not themselves ethnomethodological. Moreover, the studies of organizational processes described here have shown the profound extent to which the normalizing procedures are embedded in what may be termed ‘organizational exigencies’. Again and again the studies show finely-detailed connections between the routine normalizing activities that make up the daily work of the organizations on the one hand and the social arrangements of the organizations, with their obligations and their ‘considerations’, on the other.
The studies show the extent to which the normalizing activities were tied to the terms of employment, to various internal and external chains of reportage, supervision, and review, and to similar organizationally supplied ‘priorities of relevances’ for assessments of what ‘realistically’, ‘practically’, or ‘reasonably’ needed to be done or could be done, how quickly, with what resources, seeing whom, talking about what, for how long and so on. (Garfinkel: 1984a, p. 13).

In the process, these studies have begun to establish a new sociology of knowledge which is freed from the strait-jacket of prescriptive rationality and in which the reflexive ties between the social constitution of knowledge and the institutional contexts in which that knowledge is generated and maintained are given their full weight as sociological phenomena.

2 Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis has developed over the past fifteen years as a vigorous and distinctive aspect of ethnomethodology. During this time the perspective has given rise to a very substantial research literature which is strikingly cumulative and interlocking. Of all the research streams of ethnomethodology, conversation analysis is perhaps the one most occupied with the direct analysis of social action. From the outset, the approach has been resolutely empirical. Rather than speculating about idealized characteristics of social action, conversation analysts have directed their empirical investigations towards ‘actual, particular social actions and organized sequences of them’ (Schegloff: 1980, p. 151). The outcome has been remarkable. A large literature has developed which contains results of great scope and cumulative power and which has had a considerable impact on the neighbouring disciplines of social psychology, linguistics and cognitive science.

The basic research posture of conversation analysis was collaboratively developed in a series of papers by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson. Their analyses, like other ethnomethodological studies, focused on the methods or procedures by which ordinary social participants conduct their interactional affairs. All evidence for the participants’ orientation to, or use of, these procedures was to be derived solely from the behaviour of the participants in the ordinary circumstances of their lives. As Schegloff and Sacks summarized the orientation:

We have proceeded on the assumption … that insofar as the materials we worked with exhibited orderliness, they did so not only to us, indeed not in the first place for us, but for the co-participants who had produced them. If the materials … were orderly, they were so because they had been methodically produced by the members of society for one another. (Schegloff and Sacks: 1973, p. 290).

This posture plainly entails the use of naturalistic methods of study, but the choice of subject-matter was initially not particularly principled. Indeed, as Sacks recalled, the initial motivation to study ordinary conversation was methodological, reflecting a desire to see if the organizational details of naturally occurring interaction could be subjected to formal description (Sacks: 1984a, p. 26). It was the success of this venture that led to a more intensely substantive interest in the details of interaction.

Despite the fact that Sacks and his co-workers began studying ordinary conversation almost by accident, conversation analysts have maintained a primary research focus on ordinary, mundane interaction rather than, for example, the ‘institutionalized’ interaction of the courtroom or the business organization. There are good reasons for this approach. Not only is ‘ordinary conversation’ the predominant medium of interaction in the social world, it is also the primary form of interaction to which, with whatever simplifications, the child is first exposed and through which socialization proceeds. There is thus every reason to suppose that the basic forms of mundane talk constitute a kind of benchmark against which other more formal or ‘institutional’ types of interaction are recognized and experienced. And indeed, more recent studies of ‘institutional’ interaction do show systematic variations and restrictions on forms of action relative to ordinary conversation (see, e.g., Atkinson: 1982; Atkinson and Drew: 1979; Drew: 1984; Heritage: 1984b; Maynard: 1984; Mehan: 1979). Thus mundane conversation represents a broad and flexible domain of primary interactional practices. In approaching it, conversation analysts have, where possible,...

36 The term ‘conversation analysis’ is preferred to the sometimes-used conversational analysis because, within this field, conversation is the object of investigation. The field began to emerge in the late 1960s with the publication of Schegloff (1968) and the widespread circulation of Sacks’s unpublished lectures (Sacks: 1964–72). Although no monograph-length introductions are available, summary outlines are contained in Atkinson and Drew (1979, pp. 34–81), Heritage (1984a, pp. 233–92), Levinson (1983, pp. 284–370) and West and Zimmerman (1982). Collections of published studies include Atkinson and Heritage: 1984; Psathas: 1979; Schenken: 1978; Sociology: 1978; Zimmerman and West: 1980. See Heritage (1985) for a lengthy bibliography.

37 Both Sacks and Schegloff underwent graduate training with Goffman and their approach to studying the common-sense reasoning underlying ordinary actions may reflect convergent influences from both Garfinkel and Goffman. Both may be said to have departed from Goffman’s example in the extent to which they abandoned ethnographic styles of analysis and reportage in favour of increasingly systematic efforts to render both the logic and the practical reasoning informing conversational interaction explicit.

38 See, for example, Bruner (1983), Ochs and Schieffelin (1979) and Snow and Ferguson (1977) for accounts of some aspects of the simplifications which accompany mothers’ speech to young children.
focused on interaction between peers with an underlying research strategy of uncovering what is systematic about social interaction in the broadest range of "unmarked" interaction contexts. In turn this approach offers the best hope of determining what is distinctive about interactions involving, for example, the specialisms of the school or the hospital or the asymmetries of status, gender, ethnicity, etc.

As already mentioned, conversation analysis was developed as a naturalistic programme of research. In pursuit of its goals, every effort is made to maintain a direct focus on the specifics of interaction which is naturally occurring and uncontaminated by interventions from the researcher. This research strategy is strongly maintained and is associated with the view (see pp. 241–2) that social actions and the social settings to which they stand in a reflexive relationship are established in and through the details of interaction. Research procedures which result in the loss of detail or its contamination are therefore to be avoided as far as possible.

The central objective of conversation analysis is to uncover the social competences which underlie social interaction, that is, the procedures and expectations through which interaction is produced and understood. A number of assumptions are made in pursuit of this task. First, it is assumed that interaction is organized by reference to institutionalized procedures which, for analytical purposes, can be treated as structures in their own right (cf. Schegloff: 1986). Second, it is assumed that contributions to interaction are both context-shaped, in that actions cannot be adequately understood without reference to the context of preceding actions to which they are generally understood to respond, and context-renewing, in that each current action will propose a current here-and-now definition of the situation to which subsequent talk will be oriented. Finally, as noted above, it is assumed that social actions work in detail and hence that the specific details of interaction cannot simply be ignored as insignificant without damaging the prospects for coherent and effective analyses.

At its inception, conversation analysis was developed in two major dimensions. First, arising from both Garfinkel’s and Sacks’ concern with descriptive accounting (Garfinkel: 1984; Garfinkel and Sacks: 1970; Sacks: 1963) there emerged a number of papers on particular lexical formulations and

referring expressions (e.g. Sacks: 1973; Sacks and Schegloff: 1979; Schegloff: 1972) of which the most influential derived from Sacks’s research on communications to a suicide prevention centre and in his work on membership categorization devices (Sacks: 1972a; 1972b). The second, simultaneously emerging dimension of conversation-analytical research focused on the sequential organization of interaction and it was this second dimension which came to assume increasing prominence in conversation-analytical publications after 1972. The best known of these latter publications centred on the management of conversational turn-taking (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson: 1974) and the related problems of securing coordinated entry to (Schegloff: 1968), exit from (Schegloff and Sacks: 1973) and suspension of (Sacks: 1974) turn-taking procedures for conversation. These papers were the first to show a detailed and systematic set of procedures for turn-taking that was consistent with a wide variety of basic facts about interaction. In so doing they established completely new standards of rigour and comprehensiveness in the study of social interaction and, as a result, they became highly influential. Moreover the studies introduced further analytical concepts for the study of interaction which were not confined in their significance to the study of turn-taking per se.

The most important of these concepts was that of the adjacency pair. This concept embodies the observation that certain kinds of activities (such as greetings and farewells, questions and answers, etc.) are conventionally organized as pairs such that the production of a first member of the pair both projects and requires that a second, complementary action should be produced ‘next’ by the recipient of the first. The concept unlocked a number of aspects of the reasoning procedures informing interaction. It suggested ways in which social participants can find projected ‘next’ actions to be noticeably or non-trivially absent (Sacks: 1972b; Schegloff: 1972). It also indicated how second actions that were unrelated to a first could be understood as misaligned or in error. And, perhaps most importantly, it suggested how second speakers could be treated as normatively accountable for failures to respond, faulty responses and other interactional mishaps — thus intimating an inbuilt motivation for competent conversational performance (see also Sacks et al.: 1974, pp. 727–8). Although the adjacency-pair notion was developed in the context of paired actions (such as greetings and farewells) that were clearly geared to turn-taking contingencies, the concept obviously had a broader applicability.

At a further level, the concept suggested a primary mechanism through which intersubjective understanding is maintained in interaction. For, to the extent that ‘next’ actions can be found to be fitted to the prior first-pair part, they can be treated as displaying understandings of the first-pair parts that are appropriate to the fit. Thus second-pair parts not only accomplish (or fail to accomplish) the relevant next action, in so doing they also display a public understanding of the prior utterance to which they are directed, and that understanding is available for ‘third turn’ confirmation, comment, correction, etc., by the producer of the first-pair part. Thus adjacent pos-
itioning provides a resource for the continuous updating of inter-subjective understandings. Moreover it is by means of adjacent positioning, as Schegloff and Sacks (1973) observed, that various forms of failures can be recognized and that appreciations and corrections etc. can be understandably attempted.

In sum, the unpacking of the adjacency-pair concept considerably developed and particularized some important elements of what Garfinkel has referred to as the ‘incarnate accountability’ of action. The general pattern of analytical reasoning that was sketched out in these papers has subsequently been applied to an ever-expanding range of interactional activities. These latter have included non-verbal conduct including the organization of a range of features of gaze and body movement (Goodwin: 1981; Heath: 1986), the ‘preferential’ organization of alternative courses of conduct (Davidson: 1984; Pomerantz: 1978; 1984; Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks: 1977) and a wide range of more particular topic areas (see Heritage: 1985 for details).

In the past five years or so, conversation analysis has begun to branch out from its ‘baseline’ in mundane conversational activity toward studies of interaction in a range of institutional settings involving strongly-defined social roles, such as classrooms, courtrooms, news interviews, doctor-patient and other institutionally-regulated forms of interaction. This work exhibits certain differences from the original foundational work in conversation. While ‘pure’ conversational interaction has been shown to be organized in terms of formal principles which permit cumulative findings of considerable abstractness and power, studies of interaction in institutional settings presently exhibit a more piecemeal aspect. As noted above, institutional interaction seems to involve specific narrowings and re-specifications of the range of options that are operative in conversational interaction. More importantly, these narrowings and re-specifications are conventional in character: they are culturally variable, they are sometimes subject to legal constraints, and they are discursively justifiable and justified by reference to considerations of, inter alia, task, equity and efficiency in ways that mundane conversational practices manifestly are not. Associated with these conventions are differing participation frameworks (Goffman: 1981) with their associated rights and obligations, different footings and differential patterns of opportunity and power.

A basic point of departure for some of the more recent studies in institutional interaction has been Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson’s comparative discussion of different turn-taking systems (1974: pp. 729-30). Since then analyses by McHoul (1978), Mehan (1979), Atkinson and Drew (1979) and Greatbatch (1985) have detailed the forms of turn-taking which are characteristic in classroom, courtroom and news-interview interactions. These studies converge in suggesting that the relatively restricted patterns of conduct characteristic of these settings are the product of turn-type pre-allocation (Atkinson and Drew: 1979) and that this form of turn-taking has a pervasive influence both on the range and design of the interactional activities which the different parties routinely undertake and on the detailed management of such encounters (see also Schegloff forthcoming). Other studies of institutional interaction are concerned with investigating the management of particular activities in a range of settings and with the patterning of power imbalances in interactional conduct.

Because institutional interaction is conventionalized and culturally variable, the studies that deal with it are less interlocking than the ‘pure’ conversation-analytical work from which they derive. None the less there is an underlying coherence of perspective which informs the field. This derives both from the fundamentals of the ethnomethodological viewpoint and from the ways in which that viewpoint is particularized by the use of conversation-analytical techniques. Based on the recognition that institutional roles are created and maintained through specific patterns of interaction, this work carries a considerable and growing potential for applied and policy-oriented studies, a potential which was by no means apparent at the inception of conversation analysis.

Taken as a whole, conversation analysis has evolved into a powerful and productive field of study which has been widely influential both inside and outside its home discipline of sociology. Its contribution to social science has already been substantial, not only in the analysis of action and the development of new methodological techniques but also in raising the general level of sociological sensitivity and awareness to the detailed organization of social conduct. There is every reason to suppose that its growth and development will continue in the coming years.

3 Studies of work

In the final section of this essay, we briefly consider a newly emerging phase of research by Garfinkel and his collaborators which is generically termed the ‘studies of work’. Although the term was originally intended to

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42 See Heritage (1985) for details.

43 See, in particular, the work by West and Zimmerman (West: 1979; West and Zimmerman: 1977; 1983; Zimmerman and West: 1980).
embrace the widest range of naturally-organized ordinary activities, the studies which have been published thus far primarily deal with ‘work’ in the narrower sense of occupational activity. These studies have focused in particular on the activities of physical scientists and mathematicians (e.g. Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston: 1981; Livingston: 1986; Lynch: 1982; 1985a; 1985b; Lynch, Livingston and Garfinkel: 1983), though investigations of a broader range of work activity are scheduled for publication shortly (Garfinkel: forthcoming).

Adumbrated by ethnmethodological investigations of work activities in a range of concrete contexts (e.g. Garfinkel: 1967; Wieden: 1974; Zimmerman: 1969a; 1969b) the new studies of work depart from their forerunners in their focus on the specific competences which comprise ordinary occupational activities. Their objective is to examine what an occupational activity consists of, and they respond to this question on a complex analytical and empirical basis.

Garfinkel introduced the ‘studies of work’ programme by noting that many social scientific studies have tended to be ‘about’ rather than ‘of’ occupations (Garfinkel et al.: 1981, pp. 132–3). He has drawn attention to the fact that while many studies of occupations have much to report about such sociologically-formulated social characteristics of the participants as their income, ethnicity, class position, role relations, etc., these studies are not informative about the fundamental activities which make the occupations significant in the first place. The occupations involve the creation of various forms of valued outcomes often drawing upon complex skills and bodies of knowledge, yet little is known about what is involved. The ‘studies of work’ programme thus embodies the recognition that there is a descriptive vacuum at the centre of sociological analyses of occupations.

Garfinkel often recalls, as a way of highlighting the problem, an exchange between Fred Strodbeck and Edward Shils. When Strodbeck wanted to use Bales’s ‘Interaction Process Analysis’ to study jury deliberations, Shils objected that while the analysis would convey the ways in which the jury functioned as a small group it would not give access to how the jury functioned as a jury (Garfinkel et al.: 1981, p. 133). Shils’s complaint raises a fundamental issue. Social scientists should be able to describe the practices which are distinctive and important about an occupation or activity. And this in turn means raising the question of what Garfinkel terms the ‘quiddity’ or ‘just whatness’ of social practices: just what does competent work in the biological sciences consist of (cf. Lynch: 1985a), what is it to demonstrate a mathematical theorem (Livingston: 1986), or to play something that is recognizably jazz music (Sudnow: 1978)?

It is important to recognize that any attempt to address this question will involve a wide range of research activities. Some of these will have a pronounced ‘deconstructive’ component: there is no reason to expect that either the statements of occupational practitioners or the normative philosophies of occupations will furnish the resources out of which an analysis that is adequate to its subject-matter can be fashioned, for such accounts routinely gloss over or conceal the practical work involved in the accomplishment of occupational or scientific goals. At the same time the ‘work’ of occupations (and indeed of other social activities) inherently embodies conceptualizations of ‘relevant considerations’ relative to the work in question that are intrinsic to and embedded within the actual concrete practices of practitioners. Thus this subject-matter – embracing analyses of naturally-theorized and naturally-organized work practices – can ultimately be addressed only through analyses based in empirical materials.

The task of analysis is approached by starting with what the occupational practitioners recognize as belonging to a domain of work activities and work competences. These activities are predominantly treated through examining concrete features of occupational practices, normally in the form of taped or documentary records. Thus competences are exclusively treated from within, that is, as recognized and acted upon by the practitioners in ordinary settings of work activity. Within this framework, as Lynch et al. point out, the analyses centre on the ways in which the logical and reasoned character of occupational actions is made publicly available through

orders of intersubjectively accountable details; the order of spoken utterances by different parties in conversation, the compositional order of manipulated materials at the laboratory bench, or the transitive order of written materials on a page of text. (Lynch et al.: 1983, p. 206)

The complex interweaving of temporal organization into the substantive practices of competent occupational practitioners has formed a particularly valuable point of entry into studies of their properties.

What is being attempted here is a substantial departure from existing sociological practice and very much more complex than it may appear at first sight. The methodological issues which surround the ‘studies of work’ programme – such as determining the scope and dimensions of occupational activities, finding ways of depicting their ‘units’ and ‘segments’, establishing criteria of adequacy in depicting their naturally-theoretic commitments, etc. – are considerably more thorny and complicated than, for example, those which are involved in conversation analysis. And the studies of work have involved the use of a variety of research methods, including a range of ethnographic techniques, forms of textual analysis, conversation-analytical procedures, and others. This methodological pluralism is a response to the fact that occupational domains may be manifested in a variety of ways – for example, in bodily and conversational activity for which a video recording might be the most appropriate mode of analytical access, but also in documentary records of various kinds requiring different methods of approach.

44 See the discussion of this issue in Garfinkel et al. (1981) and in Holton’s (1981) response to it. Further discussion of the ways in which written formulations of scientific findings both obscure and depend upon underlying work-site competences may be found in Garfinkel (1983) and Livingston (1986).
Regardless of the particular procedures that are employed, Garfinkel proposes that the studies of work should be disciplined by what he terms the 'unique adequacy requirement'. This requirement arises out of the fact that occupational skills and scientific knowledge have advanced through the development of practices and techniques which are commonly highly specific to particular tasks or objectives. This specificity imposes considerable demands on any researcher who wishes to investigate them. For example, any analysis of the correspondence of a law firm which fails to recognize that many elements of legal phraseology have a particular legal status which has been tested in the courts will inevitably fail to grasp the nature of this aspect of legal work. Similarly, an ethnographic study of a scientific laboratory conducted by someone who is not competent in the relevant scientific field is unlikely to yield much that is instructive about the organization of its scientific practice. In sum, much of what is carried out within an occupation - which, from the practitioner's point of view, may range from the familiar and instantly recognizable to the esoteric - is likely to be opaque to an outside observer. Accordingly, Garfinkel advocates that all forms of investigation be carried out within the 'unique adequacy requirement' - the requirement that the researcher be a competent practitioner in the domain of activities under investigation. This requirement, he proposes, optimizes the chances that the fundamental research objective of the 'studies of work' programme will be realized, namely that the constituent details of occupationally competent activities will be depicted with as much precision and specificity as possible.

The new studies of work represent a substantial extension of the preoccupations which have been at the centre of Garfinkel's work for the past twenty years. Each of these studies involves the maintenance of ethnomethodological indifference: the activities of brain scientists, mathematicians or jazz pianists are presented without celebration, irony or relativization and without transforming their technical features or downgrading their achievements. By the same token, the new studies also express an important continuity in Garfinkel's sociological programme. From his earliest writings, Garfinkel has rejected any approach to sociological analysis that was premised on a distinction between rational and non-rational actions and that meted out different explanatory treatments to each. As we have seen, such an approach was central to Parsonian theorizing. The notion that rational actions are their own explanation, while non-rational actions can be explained by reference to the determinist influence of moral norms resulted in a loss of analytical purchase on the accountable, reasonable features of ordinary activities. Equally, however, it led to the conclusion that highly-rationalized scientific activities lay outside the remit of sociological investigation.45 Garfinkel's theoretical perspective advocates the restoration of

45 A parallel position was adopted by Bloor (1976) who coined the term 'sociology of error' to characterize sociological perspectives which excluded science as an object of investigation on epistemological grounds. For a range of related positions in the

both of these domains to serious sociological study and it is in the 'studies of work' programme in particular that he and his collaborators have broached the second domain in earnest.

The relentless focus of these studies - a focus which inevitably defies the task of an overview - is on the specific, discoverable, material practices which make up these activities. Their objective, therefore, is detailed descriptions of naturally-organized social practices which, like observations in the natural sciences, can be reproduced, checked, evaluated and form the basis for naturalistic study and conjecture. Their revolutionary character lies simply in the fact that, before Garfinkel raised the issue, the question of depicting just what the business of ordinary work activity consists of had never been raised as a serious descriptive task. The studies so far published are of great intrinsic interest and, if the development of related fields such as conversation analysis is any guide, they promise a theoretical and practical relevance which is no less substantial.

Conclusion

Any assessment of the contribution of ethnomethodology to the contemporary state of sociology must inevitably begin with the wholesale transformation of the theory of action that was initiated in Garfinkel's researches. The essential moves in this process were, first, the decision to study the characteristics of the reasoning and the rationales which, at whatever level of conscious orientation, enter into choices among courses of action. This decision was, secondly, an unconditional one in the sense that the reasoning was to be studied regardless of the extent to which it appeared rational when viewed from the outside. Studying practical reasoning in this way means, thirdly, looking at the rationales of action from within the contexts in which they are used. And, as we have seen, this means bracketing questions of their ultimate validity or effectiveness in favour of looking quite simply at how they work out in practice. It has also, fourthly, meant studying social processes as naturalistically as possible for, if the rationales are employed (and make specific kinds of sense) only in particular circumstances, their articulation with the contexts in which they are used can only be explored naturalistically.

These proposals have struck some commentators less as an approach to the analysis of action, than as explorations of subjective consciousness or, at best, as avenues toward the study of social cognition. This is not an appropriate understanding of Garfinkel's initiative. His entire approach to the analysis of action and its rationales is premised on the public account-sociology of science, see the contributions to Collins (1981) and to Knorr-Cetina and Mulkay (1983). Latour and Woolgar's (1979) study of laboratory science converges in atmosphere, though not in specific orientations, with the 'study of work' programme.
ability of action. Each social action is a recognizable commentary on, and intervention in, the setting of activity in which it occurs. Its specific character as commentary and intervention (i.e. its public accountability) has a procedural basis. It is the product of procedures or methods which are socially shared and used. These methods are numerous, reticulated and complexly interrelated. None the less, since they form the fundamental framework through which action will be interpreted, they will inevitably inform the design and production of action as well as its interpretation. Thus it is the procedural basis of action which bridges the gap between cognition and action, both practically for the actors and theoretically for the social scientist.

Viewed in this context, Garfinkel’s theoretical writings represent an extraordinary achievement. For they embody a grasp of the foundations of social action, intersubjective understanding and social organization in a single core phenomenon: the methodically accountable character of ordinary social activity. From the Harvard years onwards, Garfinkel has occupied a wholly original analytical position in relation to the topics of social action and social order. In the intervening years, he has worked to give this vision practical demonstration, coherent shape and depth of penetration. The vision has proved to be a fecund one inspiring, and finding confirmation in, the hundreds of conversation-analytical and related studies which have appeared in the past decade.

As a dialectical correlate to this analysis of action as based on methodical knowledge, Garfinkel has also stressed that, regardless of how specialized or technical it is, the knowledge which is used in everyday settings cannot be analysed independently of the courses of action through which it is acted upon, maintained and validated. This theme emerges particularly strongly in the studies of organizational activity which he has both undertaken and inspired and is surfacing in a still stronger form in the more recent studies of work. The studies of action and the analyses of knowledge practices thus represent complementary aspects of the same programme of investigation.

Above all, these studies, in all their facets, have sought to turn attention away from prematurely-theorized conceptions of the social world and towards the empirical phenomena of social activity in all their richness and diversity. In this way they express Garfinkel’s continuing stand against ‘all attempts, no matter how thoughtful, to specify an examinable practice by detailing a gencrality’.

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Structure Theory and Social Praxis

IRA J. COHEN

‘Human beings make their own history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing’ (Marx: 1963, p. 15) is an aphorism that appears more cogent in the preface to most works on social theory than it does in the conclusions. There is, of course, a substantial body of theory and research that illuminates various processes and procedures through which social action is produced, but such works generally neglect the implication of historically-inherited collective circumstances in the course and outcome of social conduct, and make no mention of the constitution of social collectivities. Theory and research that capture the contours of collectivities have been fundamental objectives of social science since its inception, but accounts of social action incorporated in such works are typically designed to stress the intrusion of structural or systemic circumstances into the consciousness of actors or the domains in which activity occurs, while the practices through which the production of social life takes place remain unaddressed. The numerous analytical arguments and methodological procedures that have been advanced to ascribe priority to either social action or the properties of collectivities are difficult to sustain when considered in light of two textbook truisms: the existence of collectivities exhibiting specific properties and particular configurations depends upon the transaction of determinate forms of conduct; conversely, social conduct is carried out in different ways in historically-specific types of collectivities. The only plausible conclusion once these maxims are joined, is that properties of collectivities and procedures of action in some way presuppose another in the reality of social life. To ascribe priority ab initio to structure or action appears mistaken and misleading when it is recognized that the two are intertwined whenever human beings make their own history.

If it were a simple matter to reconcile action and collectivities in a single

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2 For variations on this theme, see Simmel (1950, pp. 12-13) and Vico (1968, p. 382, para. 1108).