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From Being Accountable to Being Principled

Stanley Raffel

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The undeservedly neglected form of theorizing developed by Alan Blum and Peter McHugh, with special attention to how it has emerged from their interpretation of Harold Garfinkel’s *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, will be my focus today. However, let me begin with a statement, a highly controversial statement, in which Blum and McHugh both acknowledge the importance of and show why they have reservations about this conference’s overall topic, technology. They write:

... the authoritative standard for all the modern arts and sciences is the image of self-reflection as technology and of the self-reflective speaker as a technologist. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 5)

So, in their opinion, technology is unquestionably a worthy topic. But they also note an unfortunate tendency associated with treating any method as a technology:

The technologist tends to disregard the way in which the rules that he follows are rooted in the deep need to ground the validity of those rules in a principled conception of good discourse. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 5)

This disregard is a problem because it suggests that the technologist is ‘abstract about his principles’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 5) which is to say:

...he treats his rules as if they originated necessarily and inevitably and not through the oriented and motivated work that draws upon a sense of the competition between.... ways of discoursing. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 5)

Now I do not think they are saying we need to reject a technology someone has invented. But it is a mistake to abstract a technology from the oriented and motivated work that gives it whatever rationality it has. Avoiding this mistake is one way to interpret what orients and motivates Blum and McHugh to read Garfinkel in the way they do. Bearing in mind their reservations about treating even work they greatly respect as providing a technology will make their way of reading him appear less strange.

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So, as I said, I am trying to introduce you to a neglected theory and I will do so by relating it to Garfinkel’s classic work. However, still before I begin, I should note that there is one clear-cut exception to this history of neglect. Melvin Pollner, in 1991 and again more recently in an article published posthumously, has bemoaned the fact that most ethnomethodology has lost the radical implications that follow from any adequate appreciation of Garfinkel’s discovery of the reflexivity of all supposed findings. (Pollner, 1991, 2011) Pollner also points out that it has done so in the
interest of securing apparent objectivity for these findings. Pollner specifically cites Blum and McHugh and acknowledges that they are the only students of Garfinkel who seek to invent a method that is fully reflexive. However, even Pollner’s later article only seems aware of Blum and McHugh’s earlier work. I do not think even the authors would deny that this is not the most articulate—the fully mature—statement of their work. I would say it was done at a stage when they themselves could not be said to have been fully clear on what their program amounted to and how best to convey it. It is by drawing on what I call their mature work, Self-Reflection in the Arts and Sciences, that my remarks today have been assembled.

Now to begin, with Garfinkel. At the beginning of his book, Harold Garfinkel writes of the various papers that follow:

Their central recommendation is that the activities whereby members produce and manage setting of organized everyday affairs are identical with members’ procedures for making those settings “account-able.” (Garfinkel, 1967, 1)

When an author is this clear about the focus of his work, we ought to give the statement our full attention. Garfinkel, then, is interested in the procedures members adopt to make settings “account-able.” Who do they need to be able to account to? Presumably, fellow members. What procedures does he have in mind that enable them to manage this feat? To answer this question, we need to look at some of his studies.

For example, there is his study of jurors. So, first, what is it for jurors to be able to account for what they do and, second, what procedures enable—produce this account-ability? To be accountable is to decide “reasonable causes and remedies.” (Garfinkel, 1967, 105) That Garfinkel puts this phrase in inverted commas serves to indicate that this will be a members’ version of what is reasonable. That is, he does not endorse it but it is what members must do if their decision—it of course being normally part of a juror’s task to make a decision—is to be accountable to fellow members, i.e. seen as reasonable by them.¹

Second, what are these procedures for producing a so-called reasonable verdict? Here what he says we need to study are the ‘rules that govern’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 107) or, we could say, produce the decision. Garfinkel identifies two sets of rules. He lists 10 rules that he calls ‘the official line.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 108) These are what any competent judge would tell the jurors they must do. He also lists 8 rules which, according to the actual jurors’ behavior that he witnessed, enable a decision. For example: ‘Those decisions are correct that are made with respect for the time it takes to arrive at them.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 108) To understand the force of this, it helps to imagine Garfinkel observing jurors and being somewhat surprised. In this instance, the surprise would be that, if it takes them longer to decide he was innocent than to decide he was guilty or, to be fair, vice versa, the shorter to arrive at decision is seen as the correct decision. Or, a second example, do not necessarily adopt ‘a neutral attitude toward the everyday relationships that exist among persons on the jury’.

¹ In fact, because one option can be a ‘hung jury,’ even the inability to make a decision may need to be made account-able.
Here it helps to imagine Garfinkel being struck by the fact that juror A changes his mind because he did not want to damage his relationship to juror B.

That these are, by and large, the actual rules jurors follow is news, of course, because it is not what they are supposed to be doing as jurors. To us sociologists an additional reason why it is news is that following these sorts of rules is not the behavior that Talcott Parsons claimed is necessary for social order. Garfinkel, who never denies that his too is a theory of social order, then has another theory of how order is produced than does Parsons.

It is tempting but inaccurate to conclude that what Garfinkel is saying is that it is by following these sorts of rules rather than the official line that jurors are able to account for what they do. This is not his actual point because a. it is not all jurors do and b. if they just did this, they would not actually be able to account for their behavior to fellow members. In other words, what they do would not manage to be seen as reasonable. Members’ additional work is to manage the discrepancy between the rules they do follow and the official rules or, as Garfinkel puts it, do ‘the work of assembling the corpus which serves as grounds for inferring the correctness of a verdict.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 110) The additional thing they do is idealize their accounts of their decision-making procedures in order to make them conform to the official rules and their methods for doing this are as much a part of succeeding to be accountable as their actual following of the unofficial rules. These methods are part of what Garfinkel means, both by the reflexivity of accounts and by the fact that, to members, this reflexivity is ‘uninteresting’. (Garfinkel, 1967, 7) By the reflexivity he means that by their activity they produce what they claim is just there. By its uninteresting character, he means they repress or otherwise manage to ignore their role in their accounts’ production. That they will not acknowledge their role is indicated for example by the fact that his attempts to get them to acknowledge it ‘rapidly use up interview rapport.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 113)

Who is included among these ‘reasonable’ members besides jurors? The shocking news is that also included are all previous sociologists before Garfinkel. The documentary method study is where he makes this argument. He shows that there are various ‘unofficial’ procedures that manage to make even random answers reasonable and then says: ‘Much of “core” sociology consists of “reasonable” findings.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 110) Sociologists, like jurors, produce findings they can account for to fellow members by adopting the same ‘uninteresting’ methods for managing to be accountable. The list of ‘findings’ in which Garfinkel detects unacknowledged methods at work is sweeping. Thus he cites:

Goffman’s strategies for the management of impressions, Erickson’s identity crises, Riesman’s types of conformity, Parsons’ value systems, Malinowski’s magical practices, Bale’s interaction counts, Merton’s types of deviance, Lazarsfeld’s latent structure of attitudes, and the U. S. Census’ occupational categories. (Garfinkel, 1967, 78-9)

So much for the status of mainstream sociology!

An aside is necessary at this point. Michael Lynch has written an article which, as I
see it, has as its main aim defusing Pollner’s critique of Ethnomethodology for not accepting full reflexivity. I am not going to attempt a considered response to Mike here but I will say that, in his reading, this particular study’s discovery of the reflexivity of these accounts does not pose a problem for sociologists and here I quote:

There is no general reason to suppose that the discovery of the reflexivity of accounts poses an underlying ‘problem’ (as opposed to a resource) for sociologists, economists, operations researchers or auditors whenever they develop formal models, indices, and assessments of social organization.

(Lynch, 2002, 42-3)

That is, while as a good student of Garfinkel he has no intention of denying that say Merton’s forms of deviance or Goffman’s impression management are essentially reflexive accomplishments, he does not see this reflexivity as a problem for the status of their work. What this interpretation of this study fails to appreciate is that the study shows that it is perfectly possible for Merton, say, to ‘see’ his forms of deviance even if the deviance in the actual world he was looking at was completely random. I do think this constitutes a problem for the validity of his conclusions.

Though he has a consistent interest in accounting practices, over time Garfinkel’s version of the nature of these practices changed. His most developed statement of what members need to do to account for what they do is actually in the introduction to his book. There he writes:

Whenever a member is required to demonstrate that an account analyses an actual situation, he invariably makes use of the practices of “et cetera,” “unless” and “let it pass” to demonstrate the rationality of his achievement.

(Garfinkel, 1967, 3)

He means that whenever a common sense or social scientific member claims to discover the way it is, for example a social scientific ‘law’, there will be exceptions such as that the law only applies unless X happens or by letting pass Y and Z. His point is that it is actually only by the method of mobilizing unlesses and let it passes that one can convince oneself or others that there is a law. Given this, one can say that actually there is no such law. So, as a serious scientist should, one will endlessly try to eliminate unlesses and let it passes. But, in a good quote, Garfinkel says to do this is ‘like complaining that if the walls of the building were only gotten out of the way, you could see better what is holding the roof up’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 22). Unless and let it pass and other similar phenomena are what is creating the sense that there is a law and so cannot be removed.

That such procedures exist conclusively suggests that there is no such thing as a definitive depiction of the real world, whether by jurors or sociologists which is why Garfinkel puts the term real world in inverted commas in the very first sentence of his preface. (Garfinkel, 1967, vii) His insight can be summarized as the discovery of glossing practices. The existence of such practices and the fact that they are always and unavoidably needed to produce a demonstration that one’s account analyzes an actual situation puts paid to any member’s belief, whether juror or sociologist, to have
ever discovered definitively\(^2\) what is actually the case.

Now what does a would-be sociologist do next if he or she accepts Garfinkel’s depiction of what typical members, including all previous sociologists, are like? The two options that this talk is concerned with are the one taken by Garfinkel himself and the one taken by Alan Blum and Peter McHugh. What Garfinkel does is invent a new type of sociology that contents itself with accepting that members are this way and confines itself to depicting these accounting practices wherever they occur.\(^3\) What Blum and McHugh do is accept Garfinkel’s depiction of what members do but also think they see, because of what members do, a possibility for becoming another type of member. They also see, in what Garfinkel himself is doing, a possibility for becoming a new type of sociologist than either conventional sociologists or ethnomethodologists. This third type of sociologists is basically engaged in the task of teaching members this new possible way Blum and McHugh identify of being a member, i.e. of being a social actor.

What inspires both these developments, i.e. the new role for Blum and McHugh and the new type of membership they recommend, are two things. 1. What they see as an unnecessary limitation in the typical social actor as depicted by Garfinkel. 2. What they see as an unnecessary limitation in Garfinkel’s own alternative to both membership and conventional sociology. Our task, then, is to point to both of these unnecessary limitations and also to depict the alternatives that they inspire.

Blum and McHugh depict the social actor that Garfinkel’s portrayal of her leaves us with as follows:

> An actor who is competent, resourceful, and even masterful in his use and expression of convention...He is oriented to the life-world as one that needs to be skillfully represented in his own activities as an icon of the possibilities and limits of convention...He orients to his need to maintain and enforce intelligibility. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 114-5)

While this actor is clearly not at all passive and even would need to be quite reflective, Blum and McHugh suggests that, by devoting all her energy to managing to be accountable, i.e. to maintaining and enforcing her actions’ and decisions’ intelligibility, there is something missing that, because it is lacking, makes them refuse to concede she is doing the best that can be expected of a social actor. What is lacking is that there is no actual contemplation by her of the ‘worthiness’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 120)-the actual value- of the very thing she is setting out to do. She is doing what is expected of her-maintaining and enforcing the intelligibility for fellow members of her actions and decisions by representing the possibilities and limits of

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\(^2\) It should be noted that, as other non-positivist programs such as deconstruction have noted, this does not mean there can be no definite facts. We can sometimes be sure X murdered Y but even if that means he is guilty, we do not fully know what guilty means, e.g. does it mean it is his fault, that there are no extenuating circumstances, etc. etc. Any such conclusion will gloss much.

\(^3\) See Bonner, 2001, 276.
convention but she is not addressing the rightness of these conventions.

Were she not constrained-limited-in this way, it is not that all conventions would be abandoned or resisted. Some would be but all would be considered. Then, both in adhering to some conventions but not others, we could have an actor who ‘can recognize that he lives in convention but need not be of convention, because it is he who may (ought to) reauthorize convention through the agency of his decision to undertake or not’. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 116) For this actor to be reflective, it is not enough that she is merely representing, however masterfully, the enforceable intelligibility of what she is doing. Instead, in that her reflection takes the form of affirming or not the worth of the conventions she follows or not, her form of reflection enables her actions to deserve to be called principled.

The unnecessary limit that Blum and McHugh are suggesting that Garfinkel’s actor is suffering from, then, is that she is merely rule-convention- governed, i.e. committed to what is expected of her by fellow members to account for her own actions as cases of what fellow members sanction as intelligible. She overlooks the possibility that she could, by considering the actual value or worth of what she is doing, act out of principle.

Perhaps this just sounds vacuous which is to say as if there would be no significant difference in actual behavior between being governed by members’ conventions and being principled. On the contrary, being principled could actually change behavior. For example, we can imagine a juror who examines the worth of a convention already mentioned deciding it is actually not worthwhile to convict someone she thinks may well be innocent just because it will take much less time to make that decision sanctionably intelligible to fellow members. At the same time, this example begins to show another feature of principled action, and one that could make it seem undesirable. It has a risk attached to it, namely that because one is not necessarily always adhering to the conventions that are enforceable, in being principled, ‘there may be risks to (one’s) repute as a conventional member’. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 117) Indeed later we will go further and say that principles are never sanctionably intelligible, fully accountable as Garfinkel puts it, and so, as we shall see, they must be evaluated by other standards than the ones that Garfinkel’s members use.

The fact just noted that principled action is risky is surely no decisive argument against it but we must show, for Blum and McHugh to be right that the actor portrayed by Garfinkel is unnecessarily limited, that it is actually possible to act in a principled way. We suggest that there is nothing in Garfinkel’s portrayal that makes principled action impossible. Two things seem undeniable in social action as he sees it: that in any imaginable action, various things will be glossed and that, therefore, any claim whether by a juror, a sociologist, or any one else to have discovered, for social phenomena, the way it is, the definitive truth- can only be greeted with scepticism.

But our point is that these points can be accepted and even affirmed by principled actors. Principled actors are not claiming to have discovered the truth about an action just because they are convinced it is worth doing. And while principled actors will have to abandon some familiar and expected glossing practices, e.g. it is hard to imagine a principled juror ‘letting pass’ her sense that fellow jurors deliberately opted for the less time consuming verdict or a sociologist ‘letting pass’ a specific case
because it ruins their four-fold table, there are other glossing practices that could be kept, precisely if one can formulate how good and valuable they might be on occasion, e. g. deciding to prioritize X and ignore Y, not because that decision would be sanctionably intelligible but because one thinks in a limited time situation when one has to chose, it is much more important to do X rather than Y. So we say Garfinkel’s compelling portrayal of some features of social action does not rule out principled action.

Our other question was not about the limitation of Garfinkel’s version of action but about the limitations of Garfinkel himself. Is there something unnecessarily limited about Garfinkel’s version of sociology, i. e. ethnomethodology? In other words, can Blum and McHugh legitimately claim they are not neglecting any of Garfinkel’s valid points in designing their project of attempting to teach members to become principled?

Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology puts itself forward as a description of how members, wherever and whoever they are, manage sanctionably intelligible accounts. As such, it treats its work as discovering, listing really, any and all such methods. Included and usually emphasized, at least in the work done by Garfinkel himself, are glossing practices such as what jurors have to not mention. What could be unnecessarily limited about this work? Key to what Blum and McHugh see as the unnecessary limit begins to emerge when they write:

In fact, Garfinkel’s writings display a programmatic irony through and through. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 82)

It has to be said that they do not defend this point and only elaborate it by adding in a footnote that: ‘The Agnes story is a good example of this.’ (Blum and McHugh, 99) Though they surely could and should have tried to explain what they mean, it does seem right that Garfinkel’s studies (and not just the Agnes one) display irony. Thus, it seems ironic that jurors would try to convince others or even themselves that their guilty verdict must be right even though it is clear that one of their methods for producing it was to decide which verdict would shorten their deliberations. It also seems ironic that a sociologist would decide that his typology is exhaustive even though he visibly let some cases pass. Or, if we do turn to the Agnes study, it is ironic that someone would be convinced she is a normal, natural female while or even by concealing her penis. We now know what Blum and McHugh think Garfinkel’s studies are like, i. e. that they are ironic accounts of the practices of typical members, but what do they think is the unnecessary limitation of them? The unnecessary limitation is that Garfinkel insists that we must not treat his work as ironic. He explicitly says in his preface that his studies ‘are useless when they are done as ironies’ (Garfinkel, 1967, viii) and later that they must be done ‘without thought for correctives or irony.’ (Garfinkel, 1967, 9)

One pressing issue that now surfaces is how Blum and McHugh can deny the necessity of avoiding calling attention to the irony in members’ methods. We have already satisfied ourselves that the members’ behavior depicted by Garfinkel is not actually necessary. Members could do otherwise. Now we can notice that it is
precisely the ironic character they see, thanks to Garfinkel, in what members currently and typically do that Blum and McHugh use in order to appreciate that there needs to be an alternative. That is, it is the fact that they see how problematic (ironic) members’ current behavior is that inspires the search for an alternative. In spite of what Garfinkel says, then, treating his studies as ironic can’t be totally useless because they have managed to teach Blum and McHugh something important, namely the unnecessarily limited nature of current members’ activities.

And Blum and McHugh feel free to do both this noticing and then the developing of their recommendation because it is possible for them to do these things without themselves ignoring, in their own activity, the features of action that Garfinkel has alerted them to. That is, in doing their work of encouraging members to be principled, first they are clearly not claiming to be offering a description. Indeed, on the very first page of their book they make it clear that theirs is no ‘neutral discourse.’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 1) Second, early on they admit that they gloss:

It should be clear that our work here—the writing—is an instance of social action. What we say is not self-evident; we have purposes, make decisions, invoke rules, and gloss other options in ways that are oriented and decisive. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 12)

Later, more than admit it, they affirm it:

That the analyst’s work glosses only means that in any particular instance it shows its oriented commitment to not wanting to speak about certain resourceful understandings that it uses to accomplish its work. This disregard is not mischievous; rather, it shows what the analyst as a practical actor thinks is not worth speaking about as that which he has decided not to speak about for good and positive reasons. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 103)

So the very thing that have learned to do, i.e. make their recommendation even as they gloss some things, suggests it is far from useless and so certainly not necessary to not see the irony in members’ current practices. But they must face at least one, equally pressing, further question if we are not to concede that they merely ignore Garfinkel’s statement about irony. Why does Garfinkel himself insist, they would say in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary, that he is not being ironic? They actually have two ways of understanding the stance Garfinkel takes. First, they write:

We suggest that Garfinkel’s problematic use of “irony” here equates it with something like “invidious comparison.” (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 82)

If one’s irony amounted to merely making fun of members as somehow inferior rather than as failing to do, for very understandable reasons, what they could, at their best, do, then it would indeed be of little value. But when the irony displayed in members’ practices is not interpreted as saying something invidious about them, there is not such a clear-cut reason to deny its presence.

But another, less positive, reason than a limited grasp of the forms irony can take could be behind Garfinkel’s refusal to admit the irony in his descriptions:
Perhaps he means to say that a descriptive program that intends to be competitive with other descriptive research projects cannot survive if it dwells upon its ironic character. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 83)

One can understand the temptation to treat this sort of work as a description because if he does not do so Garfinkel is unlikely to be taken seriously by fellow members, i.e. sociologists, who think of themselves as scientists. Here we see in the limitation that Garfinkel places on himself a resurfacing of the same risk factor that tempts members in general to avoid being principled. Whereas a neutral description can appear to be sanctionably intelligible, e.g. by the method of saying: “look, it’s there”, the nature of irony is such that it cannot be judged by enforceable standards. Here it can be said that Garfinkel can be interpreted as glossing something for the same reason the members he depicts do: he could be glossing his own irony-letting it pass-in order to make his account enforceably intelligible to fellow members.  

This is not to say that such work, in the case we are discussing Blum and McHugh’s teaching with its heavy dependence on what they have learned about the irony inherent in members’ existing accounting practices from their encounter with Garfinkel, cannot be evaluated. However, it will have to be evaluated according to other criteria that how enforceably intelligible it is to fellow members.

Some of the ways Blum and McHugh’s actions can be positively evaluated will now be discussed.

Based on Garfinkel’s own depiction of them, members can be said to be not fully conscious of what they are doing because they do not or supposedly cannot face some of what an observer, e.g. Garfinkel, can clearly see they are doing. Blum and McHugh’s alternative has the attraction of proposing a way social actors could be said to be fully conscious, to realize how they produce their account.

Merely doing one’s best to represent one’s actions in a way that will enable them to appear reasonable to fellow members does not sound like moral action because there is nothing to indicate that even the actor herself sees what she is doing as particularly good or even at all good. Acting on one’s principles, on the other hand, does amount to being morally committed in what one does.

While rule-governed action does show a kind of commitment to the social world-one
is seeking to maintain it- principled action does also show a strong commitment to one’s society. The social commitment is displayed because one way to work out the value-the principled character- of one’s action is to see how it could represent a statement of what one’s society needs and should value. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 120) Neither members as depicted by Garfinkel nor Garfinkel’s own form of work (at least as he understands it) can manage this sort of social commitment. That is, ethnomethodology cannot even recommend the value of itself.

As mentioned above, both Parsons and Garfinkel are inventing actors, one of whose properties is their ability to solve the social order problem. Blum and McHugh’s proposal affirms that there is also another problem, the problem of enjoyment. Both Parsons’ and Garfinkel’s actors can be criticized for not ‘leaving a place for an actor who can enjoy what he does.’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 117) The Blum and McHugh proposal does offer a place for enjoyment, namely in the form of the animation that would accompany the sense that what one is doing is actually worth doing rather than merely an obligation.

A related point: While we agreed that the member depicted by Garfinkel would be competent, there is a question as to how motivated she would be to do actions well. If one is doing X only because fellow members expect one to, how committed can one be to making one’s action as excellent a case of whatever it is as one possibly can? On the other hand, if one is oneself satisfied as to the worthiness of one’s action: ‘it is difficult to imagine that one would want to do it poorly.’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 117) Merely competent action can be poor in the sense that it does not necessarily going beyond mere compliance.

A final point returns us to the worry Blum and McHugh have about the danger of abstraction they associate with any technology. With their way of appropriating him, both Garfinkel’s method and theirs manage to have a rational orientation and so be motivated and oriented rather than abstract. Garfinkel’s method can justify itself as an ironic comment on an unnecessary limitation of typical members practices. Blum and McHugh’s method can justify itself as providing a vision of an alternative that could be the way forward for these self-same members as depicted by Garfinkel.

As we would expect, none of these attractions of the alternative to both typical members’ behaviour and Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology that Blum and McHugh (and this talk) have developed are enforceably intelligible in that fellow members can find ways of objecting to all of them, e. g. are there not problems with advocating joy, can’t one fail to do X well even if one is passionately committed to doing X, etc. etc. However, it is certainly possible to agree that these and other criticisms are conceivable without having to also agree that they are necessarily conclusive.

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Now let me say what I think is wrong with what I have said so far. It may be difficult to develop a clear or indeed an enjoyable sense of what Blum and McHugh’s studies would actually look like from what I have said. Relevant here is a difference in format between their book and Garfinkel’s. His first chapter offers a programmatic statement and then he proceeds to do it in all his later chapters. At least superficially (and here I won’t attempt an alternative reading) Blum and McHugh’s whole book is a
programmatic statement. We don’t get to see what actual studies using the method would look like. The best source here would be later work by them or their students.

I will give one example and will concentrate on how it can be seen as an example of their method. At one point in Blum’s book, *The Grey Zone of Health and Illness*, he is talking about health and derives from his reading of the assumptions behind a quantitative study that to be healthy is defined by how long you live. Put in the terminology of their joint book, that health is long-life is a member’s conception of health, in this case the members happening to include social scientists. Now, just as Garfinkel would expect, members must produce this conception and they do so, again as Garfinkel would expect, by various glossing practices. For example, in order to treat health as measured by long-life members must make use of the method of ‘unless.’ Unless you get senile is one unless they must use to arrive at their view that long life is health. Also they use let it pass. Thus they let it pass how many long lived persons become so sedentary that it is dubious to call their lives continuing to be healthy. But members, yet again as Garfinkel would expect, treat this reflexivity that their need to gloss shows as uninteresting. They ignore the glossing they do and are content to treat what they accomplish by it as a fact.

We if not Garifnkel can now notice how ironic this equation of health with long life actually is. In other words, how many aspects of long life it must ignore to happily arrive at this equation. And now we get the further step that defines the Blum and McHugh method and differentiates it from anything in Garfinkel. Blum proceeds to develop, in contrast to the members’ version, a principled version of what health could be. The key phrase in his theorizing is his statement:

> What we might begin to appreciate is that a long life is not necessarily healthy if it is not vital, and a shorter life that is less successful at keeping death at bay...is not necessarily diseased. (Blum, 2011, 131)

I would say that, in contrast to long–life-the members’ version of health- we have vitality as a principled version of health. That it is principled can be seen in how it can only be produced by considering the question of the worth of health and the worth of life. Notice here that I do not deny that it too, like the members’ version is produced. The difference is that it is produced first by not treating as uninteresting the reflexive practices that members needed to ignore to produce their version, for example the ignoring of senile long lives and sedentary long-lives. Second, it is produced by the method of requiring that the issue of worth influence one’s formulation. It does not need to ignore how it is produced, e.g. by the need and desire to reflect on issues of worth, in order to rest content with what it has concluded.

So I have tried to show how an actual analysis by Blum both takes off from phenomena that Garfinkel deserves credit for pointing to the existence of but also, and crucially, does not stop there. And I could do, but will not today, the same sort of analysis of various recent studies by McHugh.

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As a way of concluding my presentation today I should try to be self-reflective about the nature, not of Blum and McHugh’s work, but of this presentation. Obviously I am
seeking to alert you to a book and a form of theorizing but if I am to question-reflect on this specific presentation I should consider why I am doing so by relating their work to Garfinkel.

Apart from the niceties of respecting, to an extent, the terms of this actual event, I would suggest a ground for not dealing with their work in its own right but, instead, relating it to one of its influences. I think I am attempting to overcome the strangeness that I anticipate encountering this work would make you experience. I mean quite specific strangeness that would stem from what you, as ethnomethodologists, are familiar with. Two examples of the strangeness are that the work displays a commitment and so cannot be characterized by ethnomethodology’s famous indifference. Second, even more basic, the work is, avowedly, theorizing, not bound to merely depict members’ practices.

How then have I tried to deal with your assumed experience of strangeness? By emphasizing that it is related to something that you are familiar with. We can also think more about the relationship of the strange to the familiar in this case. How did something that could seem strange arise out of what is familiar? To understand how this is possible, we need to distinguish how Blum and McHugh have read Garfinkel from how their more orthodox students have read him. I would say these others have understood him as providing answers whereas Blum and McHugh see him more as providing questions that they try to answer. These questions would include: Can there be self-reflection and, if so, what would it look like? Can there be alternatives to members’ current practices and if so what would they look like? If one realizes that Garfinkel has left us with questions, what is surely a well-considered and very imaginative attempt to answer them will seem much less strange.

References


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