

Some Memories of Harold Garfinkel

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Remembering Harold begins for me before I had even heard his name. I was at Queens College in New York City in August of 1972, having completed an M.A. in Sociology, studying functionalism almost exclusively with Pat Kendall, Cynthia Epstein, and other Columbia folk.

My Master's was on the topic of political leadership in rural communities being rapidly industrialized. The data, then in the form of a large box of Hollerith data cards, was given to me by a faculty member associated with the "Rapid Rural Industrialization Project"—a project that had collected an assortment of longitudinal statistical data collected from certain suburban Chicago communities undergoing rapid industrialization. It was a complex and multifaceted data set. I used it to write a journal article about political leadership in rural areas that built upon previous studies in this area. There were certain statistical innovations (for which I take credit) and the article was accepted to the *Journal of Rural Sociology*. Two weeks later I was asked to be part of a panel at Columbia University about rural sociology. On the face of things, these developments appeared encouraging.

Ironically, they created the intellectual crisis that led me to ethnomethodology. It was this. I had never visited any of the rural communities in the study and knew absolutely nothing at all about how political leadership might actually work in these places. I had rarely even been out of New York City. Any adult person in any of these communities would have known infinitely more about their politics than me.

The article I wrote demonstrated that its author knew how to read sociology journals and analyze data statistically via the (then) state of the art computer programs. But, as for any actual, empirical knowledge about political leadership in rural communities, I was (and I realized this at the time) seriously suspect. Just

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before the Columbia panel was scheduled I withdrew the article from the journal and I told the panel organizers to take my name off the list of participants. It was a matter of being exposed as a scientific fraud! Or, if not, if my ignorance was not revealed, equally frightening was the possibility colleagues would accept my work as evidence of expert knowledge. Neither alternative was acceptable.

Not wanting to spend a career masquerading as an expert in matters about which I knew actually nothing, I resolved to give up sociology to pursue another kind of a life. At this precise moment someone introduced to me Harold's work.

She was a fellow graduate student at Queens, Martha Nessel, who had studied with Harold at UCLA that summer. She gave me blue ink on pink paper mimeos of "Routine Grounds" and "Agnes," (some readers may remember these), and it was this poison that brought me to UCLA.

I was nervous meeting him. I told the story about my M.A. at Queens—how I felt sociology thus far had made me an expert in nothing. He laughed at that and I think warmed to me, at least as a new student.

I took the intro to EM course with Harold first semester. It was most exciting and engaging, and for me at least mostly incomprehensible. Even with an undergraduate philosophy background a lot of what he said simply flew over my head. In the beginning I would say of myself that 'present, I was absent'. It took many years (won't say how many) before I could read the first paragraph of 'Studies' with a fairly good sense of comprehension and competence.

Studying with Harold was an apprenticeship—each student progressing according to how well you were able to get things. There was suspicion and envy among us. Greeting another of Harold's students in the hallway always had the potential to be painful—friendly but almost always with a deep, underlying professional, and intellectual competition. On the level of human sensuous practice, we were all vying for Harold's endorsement and acceptance. Because of the very personal relationship that existed between Harold and his students—based upon discussion of his detailed analysis of work submitted, guided readings in seminar, and work seminars at his home—each of them can report their own particular experience of a slow but deepening understanding of the nature of our social world, and of ethnomethodology.

I knew his most publically recognized student at that time, Carlos Castaneda. By the mid-1970s Carlos was already the best selling author for Simon & Schuster. Two members of my dissertation committee had served on Carlos', Bob Edgerton and Harold. I met Carlos through Edgerton and eventually took up an independent relationship. At this time the academic challenge to the credibility of Carlos' work had taken a very big toll on Carlos and Harold's relationship, and they were not on speaking terms. If Harold saw me with Carlos on campus he would walk by as if we were not there. One time only I remember he said, "I hope you are happy with all your money". It was interesting to read articles like Arnold Mandel's (a psychiatrist from UC, San Diego who studied with Harold) "Don Juan in the Mind," or Richard DeMille's book, *The Don Juan Papers*, tracing plagiarism and falsehoods in Carlos' work. Mandel suggested that the characters in Castaneda's books were 'really' persons he knew at UCLA. He claimed that Don Juan, the main teacher of sorcery in Castaneda's books with whom he (in the books as 'Carlitos') apprenticed, was 'actually' Garfinkel. Mandel believed Carlos' descriptions of Don Juan teaching

him about sorcery were ‘actually’ about Garfinkel teaching Carlos about ethno. I think there may be some merit to this view. DeMille’s book, pursuing the great fabricator, as bizarre and driven of personal motive as it is, does a credible job of discrediting Carlos as an ethnographer of Yaqui Indians, but perhaps not of life at UCLA. Mandel made a good case for his position. Studying with Harold was for many an apprenticeship with many imponderable turns, sometimes magical and sometimes ending badly.

All students understood via Harold’s frequent warnings and admonishments that we could grasp what he was saying and writing about social reality too clearly; that is, in a way that was sensible but missed entirely ‘the phenomenon’. He characterized much of sociology in this fashion. But his style of writing did not make things easy for the reader to access the alternative. Over the years when teaching his work unhappy students often have asked me, “Why does he write this way?” Some feel he is just a bad writer. Some believe he is purposefully obfuscating. Until I read ‘Color Trouble,’ I had no convenient way to show that Harold was a great writer. I had always enjoyed reading him, and frankly found moments in *Studies* very amusing. But “Color Trouble” was a beautifully written story, acknowledged as one of the best of the year, so it was obvious even the very young Harold ‘could write’. Nor was he purposefully trying to obfuscate. He was, as he said many times, writing the best he could to say what it was that he was trying to say.

Describing social reality beginning with a different set of assumptions about it leads to immediate difficulty when the language used contains the old assumptions. Using language to shake a reader’s way of looking at things can lead to writing that is challenging. To me this is not a problem in his work but something of which to be conscious and appreciative. (A quick aside, apart from being evidence of writing acumen, it has always struck me that “Color Trouble” is an unbelievably prescient account of the Rosa Parks incident, which occurred a decade later.)

Harold and Mel Pollner guided my dissertation research about children born deaf and blind. Today that work has been widely recognized within sociology and disability studies and translated into five languages. While doing it Harold and I met together in the same way he did with other graduate students at the time. We had regular intellectual exchanges based upon materials I submitted to him, on paper and video, about what he felt I was or should be doing. These are the most special moments to me when I think about Harold. After such meetings I remember running down the hall in order to get to the Sociology Department student lounge, some hundred feet from his office, in order to write down as much as I could of what he had said. Somehow by the time I got there too much of what I had been excited about had mysteriously vanished.

The stellar Intellectual excitement was sadly at times contaminated with punishment. Harold, generally civil, proper and gracious in his behavior, could be otherwise, sometimes in the extreme, and for reasons known or unknown. (Some contributors and readers such as myself may have experienced the ‘public degradation ceremony’.) Toward the end of my stay at UCLA Harold and I had a terrible argument during which he told me that he would never sign my dissertation. It’s long ago and inconsequential in detail, but what happened was I got so anxiety

ridden I ended up at the UCLA emergency room thinking I was having a heart attack. I was maybe 30 at the time. When I came in complaining with chest pains the intern who was wiring me up for EEG said to me, “You’re too young. You are not having a heart attack... Are you in graduate school?” He must have seen a lot of us. At least he didn’t say, “Are you studying ethnomethodology?”

In retrospect it’s a funny story but one that illustrates how serious matters were taken. I ended up confronting Harold about what he said. On Carlos’ advice I first spoke with the UCLA ombudsman who, after listening to my story and reading parts of my dissertation, told me that I should inform Harold that University bi-laws required him to either resign from the committee or to sign the document. When I entered his office and explained this he laughed and said, “I guess you are ready to get out of here”. He signed with a smile and congratulations.

Harold operated on a proprietary conception of ideas. On his insistence, my dissertation contains over two hundred citations to him and his work. He was quite concerned about people stealing his ideas, or misinterpreting them so badly that it would violate ethnomethodology. Lynch (this volume) lists the various fears he had about his graduate students. They all had to with their their possible damage to the ideas about social reality that he was trying to demonstrate and/or explain, and which he collected under the term ethnomethodology. The fear was grounded in the seriousness with which he took “the work,” the words he used to describe the various inquiries being properly done within the rubric of ethnomethodology. ‘The work’ was juxtaposed to ‘career work,’ which was produced in accordance with the requirements of professional advancement. In later publications he made lists of those who he felt had been faithful to ethnomethodology and had not given up the work for career work.

As far as I could tell his actions with students were not primarily about his own professional preeminence. Throughout his career Harold consistently demonstrated he was not overly concerned with acceptance by other sociologists (see, as a good example, *The Purdue Symposium*)—so the fear of stolen or mauled ideas was not about this possibly hurting his career. It was about the ideas themselves, which he knew were intellectually important, fragile, easily misunderstood and required his guardianship; sometimes he took this guardianship to extremes. Harold was just as much afraid of being misinterpreted in ways that aggrandized his ideas as having them dismissed as insignificant. While he was genuinely pleased to have received the lifetime career award from the Social Psychology Section of ASA, he was also a person who I believe preferred the esteem of certain colleagues to fame.

Harold could be exasperating at times but in the end somehow all the problems did not matter. The whole experience, what you got, what you didn’t get, and the even bad parts, you knew were a kind of privilege. What was important was what happened intellectually during in those meetings in his office, and during the Sunday sessions he hosted at his home to discuss ‘the work’. Those experiences have never left me and are expressed I hope in the kinds of research I’ve done over the past 40 years.

Soon after meeting Harold I knew that I would never come across another person with such abilities to critically perceive and explain society. He was, and continues to be for me the anthropologist from Mars par excellence, regularly “inverting” my

view of things (funny memories here). He was the only sociologist of his time who could appreciate, allow and even urge me to incorporate embodied matters of studying children born without sight and hearing into my work. As another student Britt Robillard wrote in his book *Meaning of Disability*, there was no other sociologist who so powerfully incorporated the body into sociology, or who could have guided us in sociological study where bodily variation played so key a role in analysis.

Garfinkel remains the single most influential person in my intellectual life and I suspect that many of his students would say the same. He was, to paraphrase another former sociology teacher Michael Brown, the only breath of fresh air in sociology (and if I may add in social science more generally) during the second half of the twentieth century. That's a lot to say about someone but as his student I both suspect and hope he will be so remembered.