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The Enigma of Everyday Life

Symbolic Interactionism, the Dramaturgical Approach and Ethnomethodology

In the previous chapters I discussed two theoretical traditions which tend to focus upon macro-sociological issues, dealing with those societal entities which transcend the routines and contingencies of our daily life. In a sense, this picture dominated the sociological scene in the 1950s, and probably added to an increasing, though fragile, sense of self-assurance amongst sociologists. Whereas social psychology was thought to deal merely with the empirical study of interactions between individuals, to sociology was attributed the pivotal task of unmasking latent functions or hidden societal structures stretching over long periods of time. Back in the early nineteenth century, Auguste Comte, never missing an opportunity to express his feelings of grandeur, christened his own child, *la physique sociale* or *la sociologie*, as nothing less than the queen of sciences. During the heyday of structuralism and functionalism, and after having lost part of its dominance, sociology considered itself still to be the head of the social sciences. Soon, however, even that title had to go.

The pretension to supremacy disappeared once sociologists were forced to recognize the sociological importance of a number of studies which were traditionally considered only to be relevant to social psychology. Three schools are significant here, all distinctly American, but each conceptually very different from the other. The first school, often referred to as 'symbolic interactionism', goes back to pragmatism in philosophy and in particular to the work of the American philosopher G. H. Mead (1863–1931); other influences include Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and G. H. F. Hegel (1770–1831). The second school, the so-called 'dramaturgical approach', centres around Erving Goffman's (1922–82) writings. Mead, Simmel and Durkheim had a significant impact on Goffman's thought. The third school, headed by Harold Garfinkel (1926–), answers to the unfortunate name of 'ethnomethodology'.

It is philosophically rooted in, *inter alia*, Alfred Schutz's phenomenology and the later Wittgenstein.

If macro-sociology lost its monopoly in the 1960s, it did not happen all at once. Once the ideas of symbolic interactionism, the dramaturgical approach and ethnomethodology became widespread within the sociological community, they received mixed and extreme responses. For some the new creeds represented innovative and challenging alternatives to the hypothetico-deductive and structural-functionalist 'dogmas' of the day. But others saw the new approaches as trivial, as stating the obvious, or as new wine in old barrels. More extreme critics challenged their alleged subjectivist and individualistic biases as nothing less than heresy from a sociological point of view. At the time there was no decisive winner in this battle, but attitudes have since changed. Some of the concepts and methods introduced by these new approaches have gradually filtered through, and are now considered respectable alternatives, which, in their turn, lead to interesting new developments. This gradual acceptance is demonstrated by their usage in recent attempts to develop a grand theory of society. Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action makes use of symbolic interactionist notions, and Anthony Giddens's structuration theory relies heavily on Goffman's dramaturgical approach and ethnomethodology (see chapters 4 and 6).

Symbolic interactionism

As mentioned above, symbolic interactionists depended on Mead's work. Although some would argue that they use a particularly idiosyncratic reading of it, an exposition of Mead's social psychology acts as an important stepping-stone towards understanding the full scope of symbolic interactionism. Although the term itself was only coined by Herbert Blumer in 1937 and the movement was not in full swing until the 1960s, Mead was a contemporary of Durkheim and Weber.

Mead studied at Oberlin College, Harvard, Leipzig and Berlin, and taught most of his life alongside John Dewey in the philosophy department of the then newly founded University of Chicago. Mead and Dewey became close friends, regularly exchanging ideas; this explains, to some degree, the similarities of their respective philosophies. However, where Dewey's influence was prominent in philosophy and education, Mead's work was to be remembered especially for its contributions to core issues in social psychology and sociology. Whilst Dewey was very prolific and, at an early age, already the rising star of American philosophy, Mead, although an inspiring teacher, clearly suffered from writer's block. He never completed a book or monograph and only published his first fully developed article at the age of forty. He only gained wider renown posthumously through the publication of a number of books based on his lectures. Amongst these 'student notes', *Mind, Self and Society* has been particularly important for our understanding of the relationship between language, social interaction and reflectivity.[1] Less widely known, but still of some interest to sociologists, is the enigmatic and vast *The Philosophy of the Act*, which links insights from evolutionary theory with Mead's own 'social behaviourism'.[2] For those interested in the philosophical problem of time, there is the even more obscure *The Philosophy of the Present*, Mead's somewhat muddled attempt to integrate evolutionary biology, Bergsonian philosophy, the theory of relativity and his own social psychology.[3] Finally, there is his sketchy *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century* which, amongst other things, attempts to show the growing importance of time in science and philosophy.[4] Of these four volumes, *Mind, Self and Society* is undoubtedly the most accessible, although there are the inevitable ambiguities to be expected from a book not directly written by the author.

Although partly borrowed from nineteenth-century German philosophy, Mead's views, as expressed in *Mind, Self and Society*, were very much ahead of their time. For instance, by elaborating upon the social nature of the self and meaning, he anticipated some of the pivotal ideas in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Long before the adequacy of positivist epistemology became an issue for the social sciences; Mead expressed doubts on the validity of J. B. Watson's behaviourism for social psychology, and developed an alternative scenario in which the notion of reflective self-monitoring plays a central role.[5] It comes as no surprise that those contributors to social psychology, such as Rom Harré and Paul Secord, who attempted to create a counterweight to the imperium of positivist and quantitative methods, drew heavily, not only upon the widely acclaimed 'later' Wittgenstein, but also upon Mead.[6]

One of Mead's core concepts is the self. The self is a feature of human beings, and of human beings only. It implies the capacity to be an object to oneself from an outsider's perspective.[7] Whilst writing this paragraph, for instance, I take up the attitude of the imaginary reader and thereby look upon alternative ways of expressing myself before choosing one of them. Strongly opposing the Cartesian picture of a 'solitary' self, one of Mead's central claims is that the self cannot but be a *social* self, bound as it is with social interaction and language.[8] It is fair to say that there are two ways in which Mead's concept of the self is a *social* self, although the distinction is not one drawn by himself. Let me call them the 'symbolic' and the 'interactionist' dimensions of the social self, for reasons which will soon become clear.[9] The interactionist dimension is the more straightforward of the two. It refers to people's capacity to adopt the attitude of others. It is indeed by seeing myself from the perspective of the imaginary reader that I am able to reflect upon the meaning of alternative ways of expressing myself.

The self is social not only because of its interactionist dimension, but also because of its dependency on the sharing of symbols, in particular language, with other selves. Here, the symbolic dimension comes into play. To take up the above example again, it is precisely because the reader and I share knowledge of the English language that I am able to anticipate what the meaning of my writings would be for him or her. Whenever signs are shared, Mead uses the terms 'significant gestures' and 'significant communication'.[10] Interaction amongst animals is limited to non-significant communication. The barking of one dog to another might elicit the latter's reaction, but that reaction is never anticipated by the first dog. Although my examples hitherto have been limited to language, Mead's symbolic world also involves 'non-verbal gestures' and 'non-verbal communication'. Greeting somebody, nodding, table manners, winking at somebody or ignoring that person – all of these are examples of non-verbal communication. They are not dissimilar to verbal communication in that they also involve the self and its attendant reflectivity, and rely upon a background knowledge of shared meaning for a successful outcome.

Obviously, the self ties in with self-reflection and what are currently called self-control and self-monitoring. By self-reflection, a term occasionally employed by Mead himself but left undefined, social psychologists refer to the ability of individuals to reflect upon their own circumstances, on the meaning and effects of their own (imaginary, possible or real) actions, on their beliefs about themselves, and on their beliefs about their beliefs. Self-control or self-monitoring are terms of more recent origin, not explicitly used by Mead, but clearly implied in his writings on the self. As it is now commonly used, self-control refers to the ability of individuals to direct their own actions on the basis of self-reflection; self-monitoring is that form of self-reflection directed towards self-control.[11] To consider again the example of writing, self-monitoring implies that one reflects upon the meaning of alternative ways of expressing oneself and then chooses from amongst these alternatives. The picture thus provided is very different indeed from Watson's behaviourism – the dominant argument in American psychology at the beginning of this century. Watson's view was unsubtle, if not crude, even by behaviourist standards: human actions were to be seen as analogous to animal behaviour, to be explained and predicted through a stimulus-response mechanism. Watson excluded concepts that are not immediately observable, such as mind or self. Mead's social psychology is very much directed against this extreme form of external determinism. People are different from animals because they have selves. The fact that the self is not immediately accessible to observation is not sufficient for it to be banned from scientific analysis. The self and reflectivity go hand in hand, and reflectivity implies that people's actions cannot be explained, let alone predicted, by a simple stimulus-response mechanism.

It is not uncommon for authors to become well known to the public for some of their less penetrating or less well-developed notions, and Mead is not an exception to this unfortunate pattern. His distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' occupies a central role in the secondary literature, whilst it remains ill-defined throughout *Mind, Self and Society*.[12] The distinction is reminiscent of Henri Bergson's dynamic and static self, and it is not unlikely that in this context Mead was directly influenced by the French philosopher, since, as can be inferred from some of his articles and lecture notes, he was well acquainted with Bergson's work.[13] On one reading, the 'me' stands for the societal, conservative components of the self, and the 'I' refers to its idiosyncratic, innovating aspects. If the 'me' sets the limits of the game through rules about which moves are allowed and which are not, the 'I' refers to the unpredictable nature of any move. But on another reading the difference between the 'I' and the 'me' is that the latter is by definition an object to the former. The 'I' can never be observed. Whenever one tries to catch the 'I', whenever one attempts to observe it, it vanishes, for that which one observes cannot but be the 'me'. Whenever the 'I' acts, it instantly transforms into the 'me' and is thus inevitably lost in the past. One can recall it, but only as the 'me'.

The interactionist dimension of the self has so far been discussed in terms of an individual's ability to take up the attitude of *single* others. However, one of Mead's central assertions in *Mind, Self and Society* is that people, looking at themselves from the perspective of other individuals, often take up the attitude of the 'generalized other'.[14] This refers to a collective whole, which transcends the idiosyncratic features of its individual members. Whilst writing, I see myself from the perspective of an imaginary reader in so far as he is representative of a larger community of English language readers. By taking up the attitude of the generalized other, one takes into account rules and conventions which belong to a larger community, not merely to isolated individuals. The generalized other thus points at the societal nature of the 'me' component of the self. However, this should not compel us to believe that the generalized other is merely constraining the 'I'. It is not *in spite of*, but *because of* a set of commonly shared rules and conventions that a creative 'I' is able to come into being. If there were no language, the creative poet would have no resources. Change presupposes structure – there can be no creation *ex nihilo*.

Mead's writings are not free from criticism. Given that Blumer's symbolic interactionism very much relied upon Mead's social psychology, I will deal with Mead's relevance for sociology when I discuss Blumer. I will now assess the validity of some core philosophical argumentations which Mead presented. Mead's central philosophical position is the notion that the self is social, but Mead was unclear as to what this meant exactly. Going through his writings, it is possible to attribute two separate meanings to this notion. First, he made the strong claim that society and shared symbols are a necessary (and maybe sufficient) condition for the emergence of the self. Second, he made the weaker claim that it is fruitful, for the purposes of social psychology, to conceive of the self in relation to society and shared symbols. Mead's writings have shown convincingly the validity of the weaker claim, but they fail to provide any substantial support for the stronger anti-Cartesian thesis. At times, he seemed to assume mistakenly that evidence in support of the weaker claim necessarily implies evidence in support of the stronger claim.

There are similar ambiguities in his philosophical critique of behaviourist psychology. First, he presented an internal criticism. He seemed to claim in particular that the importance of reflectivity in human conduct makes for the inherent unpredictability of human behaviour to the extent that behaviourism fails to make the accurate predictions which it sets out to make. Second, he presented an external critique. The argument here is that, by neglecting the self, behaviourism cuts out that which is essential to human interaction. Taking the self into account leads to an enriched understanding of human conduct. Mead backed his external critique rather well, though not his internal critique. He did show successfully that his notion of the self leads to a more sophisticated understanding of the interface between individual and society. But nowhere in his writings can be found conclusive evidence or argumentation to support the statement that, due to the self, behaviour is inherently unpredictable.

As mentioned earlier, Mead's notion of a creative social self was directed against the dominant views of the day. It was Watson's determinism which had to be defeated, not by regressing into an introspective subjectivism, but by going beyond a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, and beyond an opposition between society and the individual. If behaviourism was always at the back of his mind, a similar mainstream argument was, half a century later, the target of the new school of symbolic interactionism. Symbolic interactionism emerged as a reaction against the dominant sociological practices of the day – against the alleged obsession with quantitative methods and structural-functionalist explanations (see chapters 1 and 2). Durkheim's heritage, and particularly his positivist methodology, was now considered too burdensome for the social sciences, whose subject area, because of its very nature, resists a positivist strait-jacket (see chapter 8).

Herbert Blumer (1900–87) was one of the instigators of the rebellion and, incidentally, also responsible for coining the term 'symbolic interactionism'.[15] He had been a student at Chicago, taught there for a while, and then moved to Columbia where he became a central counterpart to and critic of Merton's functionalism and Lazarsfeld's quantitative sociology. Blumer had been a student of Mead's, and was of the opinion that the sociological community had much to learn from him. Then followed a long journey of rediscovery

– not only of Mead, but also of Dewey and the origins of American pragmatism. As so often with rediscoveries, however, it was a somewhat coloured one, directed towards Blumer's ambitions for a new paradigm of sociology and inevitably reflecting his own ideas as well as those of Mead. Although it is an endearing feature of Blumer that he attributed so many of his own ideas to his mentor, and was sometimes justified in doing so, it has nevertheless unintentionally led to a slightly distorted reading of Mead.

Blumer's research programme is best approached through *Symbolic Interactionism*, a collection of essays in which he spelled out the core propositions of his theoretical argument. Four ideas are central to his version of symbolic interactionism. First, he followed Mead in stressing that individuals have selves and therefore have a capacity for 'self-interaction'.[16] Self-interaction comes into play whenever people make indications to themselves – whenever they address themselves and respond to the address before acting in public. Self-interaction enables them to evaluate and analyse things in order to plan ahead. So the individual's behaviour is not to be seen as a mere response to the environment; neither is it the outcome of need-dispositions, attitudes, unconscious motives or social values. Through interacting with themselves, people are able to anticipate the effects of alternative lines of conduct and thus to choose amongst them.

Second, Blumer deviated from Mead's social behaviourism in adding a sociological dimension, alluding, like Parsons, to Hobbes's problem of order. Parsons's answer to Hobbes's dilemma is essentially a Durkheimian one, referring as it does to the internalization of central social values; for Blumer, the persistence of established social patterns is contingent upon people's recurrent use of identical forms of interpretation.[17] One's interpretative scheme is, in its turn, dependent on confirmation by consistent interpretative schemes by others. By thus opening the path for a cognitive account of social order, Blumer anticipated Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. He went further than that, however. Compared to Garfinkel, he is more wary of portraying social life as nothing but social order, insisting that people regularly redefine each other's acts, possibly leading to new objects, new interactions or new types of behaviour.

Third, people act towards their environment on the basis of the meaning they attribute to it. For Blumer, meaning is not intrinsic to objects, neither is it a mere expression of the individual's mind.[18] Following the American pragmatic tradition, Blumer argued that the meaning of an object for an individual emanates from the individual's tendency to act towards it. Thus, a person's readiness to use a pencil as something to write with gives the object the meaning of what we call 'a pencil'. It follows that each object can have various meanings – potentially an infinite number of them. Grouse are not the same to a grouse-shooter, as to an animal rights campaigner. Again, they are different objects for a discerning gourmet who chooses them for his or her main course, a bird-watcher or a scholarly ornithologist. This tendency to act in a particular way is in its turn constituted, maintained and modified by the ways in which others refer to that object or act towards it. Within the household, for instance, numerous expectations by husband and children obviously reinforce a particular meaning of womanhood.

Fourth, Blumer used the term 'joint action' to refer to a 'societal organization of conduct of different acts of diverse participants'.[19] Examples of joint actions are a marriage, a lecture, a tennis match or a church service. Like Durkheim's concept of social fact which should not be seen as the mere outcome of psychological phenomena, Blumer's 'joint action', although made up of the component acts, is different from each of them, and from their aggregate. In other respects, however, Blumer's symbolic interactionism differs substantially from the view spelled out in Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method*, or it at least contrasts with a number of views that have traditionally been attributed to Durkheim. Durkheim's notion of social facts as *external* led to a picture of repetitive and pre-established forms of social life that are independent of an interpretative process. Blumer, instead, insisted that joint actions, however stable, are formed out of the component acts, and hence dependent on the attribution of meaning. So even in the most repetitive of joint actions 'each instance of such joint action has to be formed anew. The participants still have to build up their lines of action and fit them to one another through the dual process of designation and interpretation.'[20] Despite this, Blumer came closer to Durkheim's claim about the externality of social facts when he argues that people, whilst attributing meaning, draw upon pre-existing frames of interpretation. This Durkheimian notion allowed Blumer to allude to the historical dimension of joint actions. Each form of joint action, whether old or new, grows out of previous joint actions. As for Mead, there is no *tabula rasa* possible in Blumer's portrait of the social world.

Sociologists and social theorists have remained critical of Mead's social behaviourism and Blumer's symbolic interactionism. Underlying their scepticism is often the assumption that any substantial theoretical contribution to the study of society ought to take account of two core insights. First, there is the Durkheimian view that sociology should focus on the way in which people's conduct is constrained by social structure. Second, there is the Weberian position that sociologists should be sensitive to the unintended effects of purposive action. The critique of Mead and Blumer has often been that they do not account for either social structure or unintended effects, and thus that, however fruitful their work might be as a contribution to social psychology, they fail as a social theory. My view is that the critique is partly justified, and I will explain why.

Let me first consider the Durkheimian notion, and assess Mead's and Blumer's work in this light. There is no ambiguity in the case of Blumer: he deliberately avoided reference to structure. However, things are more complicated in the case of Mead. Contrary to the accepted view, I believe that Mead's writings do *not necessarily* neglect social structure; it simply depends on how one wishes to define structure. If one decides to follow the more recent trend in social theory to conceive of structures as rules and resources,[21] Mead's notion of the self and its attendant concept of the generalized other indeed imply the concept of structure. After all, to adopt the arguments of others implies the internalization of the community's implicit shared rules. Notwithstanding this fact, in so far as Mead's writings do recognize structure, they exhibit a one-sided, if not an impoverished, understanding of it. In Mead's work, the generalized other appears mostly as a medium which allows for (rather than precludes) agency, and as enabling (rather than constraining). Remember that, from a Meadian perspective, it is precisely because of the 'me' components of the self that the creative 'I' comes into being. There is no hint of the Durkheimian insight that structures, as unacknowledged conditions, constrain and determine people's actions.[22] From a Durkheimian view, language or mental frameworks can limit people's capacities to imagine what are possible forms of life or possible life choices. Moreover, even if certain choices are thought of as theoretically possible, the internalized generalized other is constraining in that it links particular imaginary choices with particular effects (see chapter 1).

Mead and Blumer have also been criticized for neglecting the concept of unintended consequences. Here again, critiques are partly justified. Mead and Blumer did occasionally mention that individuals are regularly faced with novel or unanticipated events, which lead to the emergence of reflectivity.[23] Moreover, in his writings on pragmatic philosophy, Mead also referred to the phenomenon of trial and error of scientific activities in which scientists learn from their mistakes.[24] Nevertheless, nowhere in Mead's or Blumer's work can be found a systematic attempt to see some of these unanticipated events or 'mistakes' as unintended or unforeseen effects of previous actions. Again, from the point of view of sociology, though not social psychology, this is a serious lacuna.

There are other ambiguities in Mead's and Blumer's work, which make it less useful for sociological purposes. Take, for instance, the notion of reflectivity, one of the key notions in symbolic interactionism. Mead and Blumer used this concept in at least two different ways. One is what might be called 'reflectivity of the first order', which involves tacit knowledge and self-reflective monitoring. Here, people reflect upon their actions, imaginary or real. When I speak, for instance, I reflect upon imaginary ways of expressing myself. This reflectivity of the first order is obviously prominent in *Mind, Self and Society* and *Symbolic Interactionism*, but occasionally both Mead and Blumer seemed to suggest a very different type of reflectivity, alluding to people's capacity to reflect not just upon their actions, but upon the underlying structural conditions of these actions. This 'reflectivity of the second order' ties in with explicit and discursive knowledge.[25] In Mead's and Blumer's work, both types of reflectivity blur into one. For sociological purposes, however, the distinction is indispensable. Reflectivity of the first order is central to our daily interactions, embedded as they are in routine practices and interwoven with the unintentional reproduction of structures.[26] Reflectivity of the second order is characteristic of 'high modernity' and, if developed by more than the single individual and part of a public-collective discussion, becomes a potential source for deliberate maintenance or deliberate change.[27]

How, from a sociological point of view, does Blumer compare to Mead? First, it is ironic that, whereas Blumer tried to demonstrate the sociological significance of Mead, he failed to take on board some of the latter's crucial sociological insights. Mead recognized the central role of the generalized other in reflectivity. It is due to shared meaning that people are able to anticipate the effects of alternative lines of conduct. The generalized other is absent in Blumer's picture, and that is a major weakness. Second, compared to Blumer, Mead's work erroneously presents a view of society that is too consensual, which may be reminiscent of more traditional orders, but surely inadequate for grasping more advanced societies. Blumer avoided presenting this picture, and rightly so. Some shared meaning might be necessary for any society to operate smoothly, but society today is characterized by the mutual co-existence of distinct cultural forms. There is certainly not just one set of implicit rules and procedures. Third, compared to Mead's purely philosophical enterprise, Blumer's strength lay in the way in which he was able to link his theory with issues of research methodology, as can be inferred from his criticisms of survey research and from his writings on the role of qualitative research methodology within a symbolic interactionist frame of reference. Loyal to the dynamic features of Mead's theory of the self and society, Blumer stressed the dynamic nature of social life – the continuous readaptation to an ever-changing environment – a feature that a number of contemporary methods failed to capture.

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach

Goffman's decision to study sociology was not a straightforward one. Goffman initially specialized in the natural sciences, then dropped out of university, toyed with the idea of going into films, and only later decided to take up postgraduate work in sociology and anthropology at the University of Chicago. Chicago had built up a considerable tradition of empirical social research; Everett Hughes and Blumer were amongst the inspiring teachers there. After graduating and publishing the widely acclaimed *The Presentation of Self in*

Everyday Life,[28] Goffman taught for ten years at the University of Berkeley, where he collaborated closely with Gregory Bateson. Bateson and his group studied, amongst other things, the phenomenon of mental illness, and there are, undoubtedly, similarities between their approach and Goffman's account of the mentally ill. Goffman subsequently moved to the University of Pennsylvania, where he developed a keen interest in the work of a group of sociolinguists. Again, this interest led to intense collaboration, and Goffman's writings increasingly dealt with the sociological dimensions of speech and conversation. His last book, *Forms of Talk*, is a compilation of essays dealing with this topic,[29] and conversational analysis often draws on Goffman's later work.

Goffman's work is sometimes referred to within the context of symbolic interactionism, and there are obvious reasons for linking the two. Both made a conscious attempt to avoid explaining human conduct in terms of system imperatives. Both saw as their object of study the interaction patterns between individuals. Both emphasized that these individuals have the ability to reflect upon their actions, and thus to manipulate their environment. However, there are also clear differences. Compared with Blumer's ambitious claims, for instance, Goffman consciously avoided the development of a consistent theoretical frame of reference (something he has often been criticized for). Also, in some respects, Goffman's work is even closer to Garfinkel than to Blumer, in particular when he referred to the way in which social order and predictability are skilful accomplishments of the individuals involved. Goffman's work, idiosyncratic and innovative as it was, cannot be written off as a mere appendix to symbolic interactionism, and it is worth elaborating upon its major themes.

Goffman has always been rather critical of the tendency to categorize or classify an author's work. This might explain why he hardly ever acknowledged major intellectual influences on his own work. Two influences are, however, beyond doubt: Simmel and Mead. Let me first deal with the German sociologist Simmel. His attention to the 'unnamed or unknown tissues' of social life struck a chord with Goffman. First, like Simmel, Goffman portrayed daily life as a highly complex enterprise in which human beings employ tacit and practical knowledge as they go along. Analogously to Simmel and anticipating some of Garfinkel's central assertions (see pp. 82–9), Goffman referred to the seen-but-unnoticed character of most of our mundane activities.[30] Second, Simmel's analysis of modern culture demonstrated the extent to which the anonymous character of modern life, rather than leading to an ethos of cynical manipulation, made for the emergence of interactions which are heavily dependent on complex mechanisms of secrecy and mutual trust. Simmel's starting point is that for interaction between modern, urban individuals to be possible they need a minimum of information about each other. However, even as each individual attempts to obtain information about others, so must the information which others receive from him or her be controlled.[31] Goffman presented a similar view. People are constantly monitoring themselves, masking bits of their selves and accentuating other aspects. The way we dress, the way we speak, our gestures – all these are meant both to convey and conceal who we are.

This brings me to Mead's influence. Mead and Goffman both portray a dynamic self, actively intervening in the world. Like Mead, Goffman accentuated the extent to which people are reflective beings, able to monitor their actions, and thus to manipulate their surroundings. Remember that Mead acknowledged that people share meaning, and are thus able to anticipate the effects of alternative imaginary courses of action. Goffman's portrait of social life assumes this Meadian framework. The existence of what Mead called a generalized other is indeed a *sine qua non* for the successful masking and presenting of the self. Without shared meaning, the subtle mechanisms of concealment and revelation would break down.

Goffman's interest was in 'encounters'; that is, face-to-face interactions where people are constantly in the physical presence of others. Encounters can involve 'unfocused' or 'focused' interaction, the distinction being mainly a matter of absence versus existence of mutual awareness amongst the participants involved.[32] Reminiscent of Mead's account of the self and role-taking, Goffman argued that, in interaction, human beings are continuously attending to their actions whilst adopting other people's views. A brief account of his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* will demonstrate how his analysis of encounters works.

Goffman analysed encounters by drawing upon metaphors from and analogies with the theatre, hence the reference to his work as dramaturgical. He was, of course, not the only one to do this. Shakespeare is renowned for portraying social life by means of role-playing. Ralf Dahrendorf's concept of '*homo sociologicus*' draws upon a similar picture. However, analogies with acting and the stage have often led to a picture of social life as somehow predetermined. This is surely not the case in Goffman's dramaturgical approach. In his view, it is fair to say, people do not merely follow a script, and in so far as they do, they are also the author of that very same script. Hence 'performances', Goffman's main topic of research, are defined by him as all activities by individuals which serve to *influence* the 'audience' within the encounter.[33] In his view, these performances are rule-governed, in that rules refer to tacit, practical codes with respect to appropriate behaviour.

The 'front' is that aspect of the performance which, in a 'general and fixed fashion', helps the audience to define the situation.[34] There are two important aspects to a front: the setting and the personal front. The setting, 'the scenic parts of expressive equipment', refers to background items which provide the scene and 'stage props' for the action to take place; for instance, *décor*. Whereas the setting is usually linked to a particular place, the 'personal front' refers to those items which are intimately linked to the performer and which therefore are likely to follow him or her around; for instance, body language or speech patterns. Personal front can be divided into 'appearance' and 'manner'. Appearance refers primarily to the social status of a performer, but it also indicates his or her 'temporary ritual state'; for instance, whether he or she is involved in work or in leisure, or how busy he or she is. Manner indicates which role the performer intends to play in the forthcoming interaction; for instance, an aloof manner might indicate a reduced commitment on the part of the performer. Normally, people expect some consistency between setting, appearance and manner, but sometimes this is not the case, which can lead to quite humorous situations – for instance, where somebody puts on a manner out of synch with his or her social status. It is characteristic of social fronts that they are abstract and general, applicable to different situations. In this context, Goffman gives the example of white lab-coats commonly used in many professions, creating an aura of 'professionalism' and reliability.[35]

In general, whilst interacting, people have to dramatize their activities in order to give the impression that they are performing well and that they have things under control. Sometimes the two are not compatible. A student who focuses on conveying to a teacher that he or she is listening might exert so much time and energy doing so that little of the teaching is absorbed. Part of this dramatization is that people, during their performances, tend to give expression to the 'officially accredited values of society', a habit obvious from examples of those who aspire to the lifestyle of their social or economic superiors (or at least what they believe that lifestyle to be). Sometimes people downplay their qualities, such as in the case of teenagers who, in the company of members of the opposite sex, may play at being rather naïve and silly. In both these scenarios, people often have to conceal those actions or signs that are inconsistent with the yearned for standards.

Whereas the above might appear highly individualistic, Goffman introduces the concept of 'team' to refer to a group of people who co-operate to maintain a particular definition of a situation. Teams have certain characteristics in common.[36] They imply loyalty and competence by each of the individuals involved, since a failure by one of them might be threatening for all. Goffman also introduces space into the analysis, the concept of region referring to any place which indicates the barrier between what is visible to the audience and what is not.[37] Whereas performances take place in the front region, the back regions involve supporting or preparatory activities for the front region. The back region provides the means for an emotional outlet for the front region, an obvious example being the waiter who politely takes orders, but once in the kitchen expresses his contemptuous feelings for the customer. Goffman introduces the concept of 'impression management' to summarize the above mechanisms.[38] Individuals tend to control the way in which they are perceived by others through a number of devices. There are, first of all, the 'defensive attributes and practices', including, for instance, 'dramaturgical loyalty', which means that team members have to be able to trust each other and to keep secrets. Second, there are the 'protective practices'. Here, through tact, it is the audience itself that helps the performers save their show. An example of this counter-intuitive claim is the case where the audience voluntarily stays away from back regions, or where people display tactful inattention once confronted with embarrassing situations. A third type of device refers to the fact that performers have to be sensitive to any hints provided by the audience so that they can alter their behaviour accordingly.

In other works, Goffman elaborated upon the rule-governed nature of the social world, drawing a number of central distinctions: between symmetrical and asymmetrical rules, between regulative and constitutive rules and, above all, between substantive and ceremonial rules.[39] Compared to asymmetrical rules, symmetrical ones imply reciprocal expectations. Whereas regulative rules provide people with behavioural guidelines in particular circumstances, constitutive rules provide the context in which regulative rules might apply. Whereas substantive rules direct behaviour with respect to those areas of life which seem to have significance in their own right, Goffman's interest was directed towards those rules which he coined 'ceremonial' and which are directed towards conduct in matters which have, at most, secondary significance by themselves. These rules, however trivial at first blush, are central to sustaining feelings of psychological security and trust. Goffman distinguished between two components of such ceremonial rules: demeanour and deference.[40] The latter refers to the way in which people present themselves as reliable and able to be counted upon. The former refers to the way in which people sustain ontological security and trust by expressing appreciation through 'avoidance rituals' and 'presentational rituals'. Avoidance rituals keep intact the ideal spheres (Simmel's terminology) surrounding the individuals: silencing embarrassing episodes are one of them. Presentational rituals are positive tools for honouring individuals through, for example, salutations, invitations and compliments.

A central notion in Goffman's work is that of 'situational propriety', referring to the way in which the meaning of actions or concepts is dependent on the context in which they emerge.[41] This notion ties in with a previous point in that, as human beings, we gradually learn practical and tacit knowledge which enables us to understand the meaning of actions within a particular context. Many manifestations of mental illness demonstrate situationally inappropriate behaviour in that the very same conduct might have been acceptable were the context a different one. The notion of practical and tacit knowledge also ties in with Goffman's concept of 'involvement', referring to the way in which people are able to give or withhold attention to others in a given situation. Involvement ties in with two other notions: accessibility and civil inattention. The former refers to our tacit knowledge with respect to the degrees of availability towards strangers and acquaintances, whereas the latter refers to our ability to acknowledge the presence of strangers whilst avoiding prolonged attention through a sign of deference. Civil inattention is one of the ways in which strangers mutually reinforce feelings of trust and of relative predictability. This becomes especially obvious whenever civil inattention is not obeyed, often a sign of outright hostility on the part of the person who breaks the rule, and which results in the other party feeling uneasy and distraught.

For a long time, social theorists have neglected Goffman's work for three reasons. First, some stated that, although he introduced a wide range of new concepts, his work lacks a consistent theoretical frame of reference. His work is descriptive. At best, the theory is implicit in it; at worst, the theory is absent. Second, some critics have stated that Goffman expressed nothing new. There are two sides to this critique. On the one hand, it is argued that a significant number of Goffman's insights had already been made by social scientists and novelists who preceded him. On the other hand, some objected to the fact Goffman's work states the obvious: it articulates what every socially accomplished person already practically knows. Third, it has been argued that Goffman's concept of the self is not a universal one. His framework is indicative of modern western culture, 'other-directed' as it is, in which people cynically stage things, constantly calculating and manipulating their environment, and in which other individuals are treated as mere objects.

These criticisms are only partly justified. With regard to the first, it is worth mentioning that Goffman did not intend to be a social theorist, and that he was actually rather hostile to the enterprise of grand theory. He would probably have been sympathetic towards Nietzsche's dictum that 'any system is a lack of honesty', but it does not follow from this that his work is altogether irrelevant for the purposes of social theory. Any study of social life rests upon some theory, and this applies particularly to perceptive analyses like Goffman's. More recently, social theorists such as Giddens have tried to reveal the core theoretical propositions which underlie Goffman's argument. Giddens's view is that Goffman shows that social order is contingent upon the constant implementation of a vast array of complex rules and assumptions which people draw upon without being immediately aware of them. The implementation of these rules tends to interlink with people's need for a feeling of ontological security. I will deal with this interpretation in the next chapter. Some people would insist that this is Giddens's view, not Goffman's. Be that as it may, Giddens's reading is certainly not incompatible with Goffman's analysis. Hence, although Goffman does not wish to present a theory, and although there is a debate as to what his theory might be, his writings are nevertheless relevant to social theory. They can inspire and have inspired those who wish to develop a grand theory.

With regard to the second criticism, it is not within the scope of this book to deal with the question of how much others adumbrated Goffman's ideas. An intellectually more challenging question is whether Goffman stated the obvious or not, and whether this affects the relevance of his work. In some respects, he did express that which is already 'seen-but-unnoticed'. Many of his observations are articulations of those trivial aspects of daily life which remain unnoticed by the individuals involved, but this does not make them insignificant for the purposes of social theory. Goffman has provided insights into the complex interrelationship between self-presentation, trust and tact, and there is a growing recognition amongst social theorists, such as Giddens and Randall Collins, that these notions are central to the production of social order and predictability in daily social interaction. Giddens and Collins overstate the case for Goffman by adopting a vague notion of social order. There are basically two meanings to order. One is politico-strategic order, referring to a relative absence of dissensus and disagreement concerning the distribution of scarce goods or power. The other is symbolic order, referring to a kind of agreement concerning the meaning of objects and actions, and, relatedly, to the co-ordination of everyday interaction. Goffman's work might be relevant for the explanation of symbolic order, though not for dealing with politico-strategic order, and it goes without saying that the latter does not follow from the former. So to say that Goffman's work provides insights into the production of order *in toto* is wrong. However, his writings certainly help to explain symbolic order and are thus relevant to social theory.

With regard to the last criticism, I wish to make three points. First, it is probably true that Goffman's view is deeply ingrained in modern western culture. But *any* conceptual framework or analysis about society shares some presuppositions with the culture in which it arises. So this argument in isolation cannot be held against Goffman. Second, without question Goffman's examples are specific to the cultural settings which he was describing, but this does not imply *ipso facto* that his work is ethnocentric. As a matter of fact, a significant number of *concepts* which he employed can be and have been applied to understand other cultural settings as well. Third, it is not true that Goffman relied upon the notion of an atomistic, calculating self. For instance, the individuals portrayed have a strong emotional commitment towards their presentation of the self. Through tact, they help others with *their* presentation of the self – and they trust others to do the same. These individuals are far removed from cynical, manipulative individuals.

Let me summarize the above. For a long time, Goffman was considered a maverick, the *enfant terrible* of American sociology. He was seen as a novelist or impressionist. Only more recently has he been presented as a reluctant theorist. Isaiah Berlin famously described Tolstoy as somebody who 'was by nature a fox, but believed in being a hedgehog'[42] – that is, while Tolstoy aimed to present a single organizing principle, his thought was actually extremely scattered and diffuse. Some have presented Goffman in opposite terms. They argue that while he conceived of himself as fascinated by the minutiae of daily existence, he could not help presenting a bigger picture. I am sympathetic towards this reading. But it should also be remembered that, unlike Blumer, Goffman himself did not wish to address core questions of social theory, and that there is no systematic attempt at theory-building in his work. This leaves his writings open to various interpretations.

Ethnomethodology

The name 'ethnomethodology' was coined by Harold Garfinkel, who founded a new sociological school under that banner. Although some recent ethnomethodologists deviate slightly from Garfinkel's initial party line, his work remains very much associated with the school. Garfinkel originally carried out doctoral work at Harvard under the supervision of Talcott Parsons. Garfinkel had already developed some ideas in his doctoral dissertation which were to become prominent in his later work.[43] He subsequently joined the department of sociology at UCLA, where he inspired many postgraduates and built up a thriving research centre. The publication of his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* in 1967 led to a worldwide interest in the newly founded school.[44] Other scholars were to follow the new creed: well-known ethnomethodologists include Deirdre Boden, John Heritage, Michael Lynch, Harvey Sacks and Don Zimmerman.

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology share much in common. Both analyse patterns of daily interaction rather than broader social structures; both neglect longer historical spans; both emphasize the extent to which social order is a negotiated and skilful accomplishment of the individuals involved; both strongly oppose the Durkheimian notion that social facts have to be treated as things, analogous to physical objects; and both symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology direct their attention instead to the sense-making practices in which people are involved – the way in which meaning is attributed to the social world.

However, symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology arise out of different philosophical traditions. Remember that symbolic interactionism was very much indebted to Mead's reflections upon the interaction between self and society. The intellectual influences on Garfinkel and his followers are more varied. There is, first of all, the influence of Parsons, especially his account of Hobbes's problem of order. Second, there is the influence of Alfred Schutz's phenomenology, in particular his concept of *epoché* of the natural attitude. There is, third, Mead's influence on Garfinkel and other members of the school. Mead had an impact on ethnomethodologists, both direct and indirect (via Schutz). Finally, there is the influence of the later Wittgenstein, in particular his discussion regarding the relationship between meaning and shared rules. Within the limited scope of this book, I will only concentrate on Garfinkel's contributions to ethnomethodology. He was especially influenced by Parsons and Schutz, and less so by Mead and Wittgenstein. I will therefore concentrate on the formers' impact.

Garfinkel and ethnomethodology are often seen in opposition to mainstream sociology, in particular to Parsons's frame of reference. It is undoubtedly true that Garfinkel rebelled against some aspects of Parsons's work, but the two also share a number of features. Their similarities and differences are closely bound together. First, Parsons's voluntarist theory strongly opposed those positivist accounts which saw people's action as biologically determined or as passive recipients to their environments.[45] In his action frame of reference, people attribute meaning to their surroundings, they have goals, they also have information about how to achieve these goals and they act accordingly (see chapter 2). Garfinkel likewise developed a view which conceived of individuals as exercising agency – not as mere products of social or biological factors. But Garfinkel presented a more 'cognitive' or 'reflective' account. He was interested in the tacit knowledge which people employ in order to make sense of reality, and, as such, affect reality. Whereas Parsons's action frame of reference played down the knowledgeability of people, Garfinkel attributed an important role to how people understand and reason.[46] From this follows Garfinkel and H. Sacks's notion of 'ethnomethodological indifference': whilst studying how people account for and produce reality, ethnomethodologists need to refrain from making judgements regarding the validity of people's sense-making practices.[47]

Second, one of the recurrent questions in Parsons's writings is how social order is brought about. This question was first raised by Hobbes, and Parsons considered it to be one of the core questions of any substantial theory of society. He thought that utilitarian frameworks could not answer Hobbes's 'problem of order'. The solution, so he argued, needs to be found mainly in Durkheim's work and to some extent in Freud's.[48] For Parsons, Durkheim has shown convincingly that the problem of order is resolved through the internalization of the central values and norms in the personality structure of the individuals involved. Values, which are internalized through socialization, have a lasting effect on both the ends of action and the means to achieve them. In general, people will not be able to adopt an instrumental orientation towards the values and norms which they have internalized. The internalization explains need-dispositions which cause people to act (see chapter 2). Garfinkel dealt with exactly the same question: how does social order come about? He found Parsons's answer unsatisfactory, however, and instead paid attention to the shared common-sense procedures by which people constantly interpret their surroundings. After all, 'ethnomethodology' literally alludes to the methods or procedures by which ordinary members of society make sense of and act upon their everyday lives.[49] From this angle, it became possible to see social order as contingent upon continuous interpretative acts by the individuals involved.

There is one obvious way in which Garfinkel differed from Parsons. Unlike most of current American sociology which was empirical and rather compartmentalized, Parsons was an incurable grand theorist, who occasionally carried out empirical research, but whose prime aim was to develop an overarching theory which would embrace a multitude of disciplines in the social sciences. Garfinkel, on the other hand, dealt with only a few questions, and he and his team carried out numerous empirical researches in order to answer those questions. Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists recognized the empirical bent as central to their work. Examples of Garfinkel's researches are the well-known breaching experiments, his work on the 'accomplishment of gender', and his analysis of the 'documentary method of interpretation'.[50] All of these play a fundamental role in Garfinkel's intellectual development.

Besides Parsons, Garfinkel found most of his theoretical inspiration in the work of the banker-cum-philosopher Alfred Schutz (1899–1959). Schutz opposed the neo-positivist tendency to postulate a unity of method between the social and the natural sciences, arguing that the former deal with an already 'pre-interpreted' world which begs for an interpretative methodology.[51] Schutz's attempt was to merge Edmund Husserl's phenomenology with sociological concerns, trying to grasp the way in which individuals understand and make sense of the surrounding social world. Schutz followed Husserl's phenomenology in attributing importance to the 'natural attitude' and its attendant common-sense knowledge. A number of features are characteristic of the sense-making practices of people in daily life activities, and these become prominent once juxtaposed with the scientific way of making sense of the world.[52] For instance, contrary to scientific rationality in which one's own biography is reduced to a minimum, common-sense rationality is perceived from a particular individual perspective, specific to time and space. Whereas scientific rationality always doubts the facticity of the social world, common-sense rationality rests mainly upon the *epoché* of the natural attitude, which implies that the social world should be taken for granted unless disruptions or new events occur. A suspension of doubt is deeply ingrained in our daily life. Through the medium of a 'stock of knowledge at hand', predominantly social in origin, people approach the social world in terms of 'familiarity and pre-acquaintanceship'. Whilst interacting with each other, people assume 'the general thesis of reciprocity of perspectives'. Schutz went on to argue that, rather than remaining at the level of scientific rationality and imposing this onto the social world, sociologists should attempt to register the common-sense, practical rationality by which individuals make sense of and account for their surroundings. This idea was taken up by ethnomethodologists and acted as one of their pivotal methodological devices. Schutz's work and his distinction between different forms of rationality was, likewise, very prominent in Garfinkel's breaching experiments. These demonstrate the extent to which scientific rationality, once applied to ordinary daily situations, erodes the implicit presupposition of reciprocity of perspectives and eventually leads to disorganization, disruption and anomie.

For Garfinkel, what is crucial to Schutz's view is that, unlike scientists, people involved in everyday situations assume an undoubted correspondence between the world as it appears to them and the world as it is.[53] Furthermore, each individual expects other individuals to assume this correspondence and to act accordingly. In their daily lives, people draw upon an unquestioned 'stock of knowledge at hand' or 'common-sense understandings' through which they and their actions are typified. Typification ties in with the capacity of an individual to anticipate another's responses to his or her actions – a truly Meadian notion. Similar to Mead's notion of a 'world taken for granted', a person's stock of knowledge is taken to be 'self-evident' until 'further notice', until disruptions occur. Implicit in most daily interactions is also the 'et cetera' assumption – the assumption that we can reasonably expect things in the future to be as they were in the past. Garfinkel added the importance of Schutz's thesis of reciprocity of perspectives, alluding to both the 'assumption or idealization of interchangeability of standpoints' and the 'assumption or idealization of the congruency of relevances'. The former refers to the way in which any person takes for granted that others would see events in the same typical way if that person's here-and-now became theirs, and to the fact that others assume this as well. The latter refers to the fact that individuals assume that, in spite of their differences, they select and interpret the surrounding objects in an empirically identical manner. It also includes the fact that people implicitly assume that other people act in accordance with the same assumption.[54] This notion of intersubjectivity was to become one of the leitmotivs of ethnomethodology as it was thought to be crucial for understanding the reproduction of social order. It is people's mutual expectations which make for the unintended reproduction of society.

Ethnomethodologists study the routines of daily life. Ethnomethods refers to the way in which, in daily life, ordinary citizens draw upon a complex network of interpretative procedures, assumptions and expectations through which they make sense of and act upon their surroundings.[55] Garfinkel introduced the notion of 'reflectivity of accounts'. By this, he meant that people constantly make sense of their surroundings, and these sense-making practices are constitutive of that which they are describing.[56] Ethnomethods is achieved through tacit and practical knowledge, rather than discursive or theoretical knowledge. That is to say, ordinary citizens do not have to know the rules or procedures explicitly. They *know* the rules only in the sense that they are skilful in acting in accordance with them, but this differs from knowing the rules theoretically in the sense of being able to state them discursively. The 'seen-but-unnoticed' character of our knowledge in daily interactions is exemplified in Garfinkel's famous analysis of 'Agnes', who was born as a male, but in adolescence purposefully designed an idiosyncratic endocrinological configuration, and at the age of nineteen decided to have a sex-change operation. After biologically 'becoming' female, Agnes still had a long way to go. She had to learn a complex set of new rules and procedures about how to behave and speak as a woman. Whereas girls would gradually 'learn' this through practice, Agnes developed a more discursive knowledge about 'how to go on' as a female, similar to somebody who is learning a foreign language. Agnes is a fascinating study of the construction of gender.[57]

Indexicality is central here. The term 'indexical sign' was originally introduced by Charles Peirce and later developed by Y. Bar-Hillel, referring to the fact that the context in which a token is used provides meaning to that token. Analogously, Garfinkel used 'indexicality' and 'indexical expressions' to allude to the extent to which the meaning of objects, social practices and concepts depends on the context in which they arise.[58] It follows that his notion of indexicality demonstrates striking similarities with Goffman's concept of situational propriety. Part of people's tacit knowledge is indeed a capacity to grasp the meaning of objects or practices within a particular context, and, moreover, to infer meaning by 'creating' or 'attributing' a context. However, the creation of meaning is not a one-sided process. Indeed, in a manner reminiscent of the notion of the hermeneutic circle, people draw upon the context or situation to attribute meaning to practices, but the latter also enable people to create or sustain their sense of the context. This 'mutual elaboration of action and context' is central to Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation, which I will discuss shortly.

Garfinkel is especially known for his empirical research, in particular his breaching experiments and the so-called documentary method of interpretation. Garfinkel's breaching experiments were designed to explore the consequences of disrupting the routines of daily life.[59] For example, students were asked to act as if they were lodgers at home. So the parents were confronted with children who acted according to rules and procedures which differed radically from what the parents used to expect from them. They were very formal with their parents, only spoke when spoken to, etc. The parents, who were unaware of the experiment, reacted with anger, discomfort and bewilderment. Garfinkel and his colleagues inferred two conclusions from these experiments. First, that people have a strong emotional allegiance towards the implicit rules and procedures upon which they continually draw. Second, they demonstrated the way in which the interpretative procedures are 'doubly constitutive' of the activities which they organize: the rules, expectations and assumptions not only make for the visibility of normal conduct in daily interaction, but also for the visibility of conduct which deviates from it. Once the rules are broken, people do not necessarily adjust their interpretative procedures, but instead tend morally to condemn the 'deviant'.[60]

Equally important is Garfinkel's concept of the documentary method of interpretation – a term borrowed from Karl Mannheim – and the related empirical research.[61] Analogously to the notion of the hermeneutic circle, Garfinkel's documentary method of interpretation alludes to a recursive mechanism in which people draw upon interpretative procedures to construct 'documentary evidences', which are, in their turn, employed to infer the interpretative procedures.[62] Whilst people draw upon interpretative procedures which make sense of reality, the very same framework remains intact and is reproduced, even in cases where the reality concerned is potentially threatening for that framework. For instance, students were asked to attend a counselling session: in spite of the fact that the counsellors gave random answers to their queries, the students said afterwards that they had had a great time and that they learned a lot about themselves. Obviously, they did not realize that this was a 'false' setting. The reason is that they drew upon an interpretative framework with background expectations about the social situation to be encountered; this framework helped them make sense of the situation and in such a way that those expectations remained intact in spite of the fact that the situation was an 'obvious' potential threat to the very same expectations.

For a long time Garfinkel and ethnomethodologists were regarded as irrelevant for the purposes of social theory. The study of mundane activities was seen as relevant for the purposes of social psychology, not for social theory. Many social theorists today conceive of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology differently. They recognize that its strength lies in its ability to account for social order as a skilful accomplishment of knowledgeable people. There is a growing consensus that the minutiae of everyday interaction may be central to the explanation of social co-ordination and cohesiveness (see chapter 4) – there is certainly some truth in that defence. Garfinkel has indeed shown that individuals have a remarkably strong emotional commitment to their interpretative procedures and expectations, and that they are reluctant to reassess their validity when confronted with disruptions. Furthermore, whereas mainstream sociology has treated common-sense knowledge as an epiphenomenon, Garfinkel has illustrated how it needs to be seen instead as a worthwhile topic of investigation.

There are, nevertheless, weaknesses to Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. First, he claimed to have answered more adequately than Parsons the age-old question of how social order is brought about. However, as with Goffman, whether he is successful in doing so depends entirely on the meaning of 'social order'. Like Goffman, Garfinkel's strength lies in accounting for the production and reinforcement of shared meaning. Like Goffman, however, Garfinkel's framework cannot explain a relative lack of dissensus regarding allocation of scarce goods and power. Whether Garfinkel's view is superior to that of Parsons depends on which aspect of order is focused upon. However successful Garfinkel might be in accounting for symbolic order, Parsons's scheme seems more appropriate for explaining politico-strategic order.

Second, partly because Garfinkel focused on people's 'natural attitude of everyday life', he failed to account for transformations in the underlying social structure. His empirical analyses have shown that most daily life activities involve the continuous application of shared commonsensical knowledge, and that, once confronted with potentially disruptive experiences, people tend to design complex mechanisms which enable them to restore order. Despite this observation, Garfinkel seemed to ignore the potential that people had, once confronted with novel experiences, to reflect upon the underlying interpretative procedures, rules and expectations previously drawn upon. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* Thomas Kuhn demonstrated how scientists, faced with the accumulation of anomalous results, have a public-collective reflection upon the underlying rules and assumptions of their paradigm, leading to substitution by a new set of rules and assumptions.[63] All this is relevant for the main project of ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodologists set out to explain social order, whilst conceiving of the latter solely as an *unintended* accomplishment. However, the reproduction of structures can also be accomplished intentionally. Indeed, people's reflection upon the structures underlying their actions can lead to the *deliberate* maintenance of the very same structures.

Third, equally problematic is the absence of a substantial explanatory format in Garfinkel's work. He did not address the question *why* people become upset or outraged when rules or procedures are broken, or *why* they attempt to reinstate order when confronted with potential disruptions. In this sense, his ethnomethodological research is descriptive – begging for explanations, rather than providing them. This does not make Garfinkel's work insignificant for the purposes of social theory. However, it does imply that, if his work is to be of any use at all to social theory, it needs additional social-psychological back-up.

Fourth, Garfinkel's tendency to neglect problems of power, prestige and asymmetrical relations is another problem, as they are likely to be constitutive of some of the mechanisms that he investigated. Take, for instance, the documentary method of interpretation and, in particular, the case of the students and the counselling session. The general aura, authority and prestige which surround the practices of the professionals are likely to be constitutive of the disposition of students somehow to suspend disbelief once they enter the counselling session, and they are also constitutive of the tendency of the students to sustain this suspension even if the advice provided is less than satisfactory. It is, therefore, indicative that in Hans Christian Andersen's tale 'The emperor's new clothes', it takes an innocent child, not properly socialized yet, to reveal that the emperor is naked. The adults in the story, obviously more susceptible to the asymmetry in social relations, are apparently more inclined to suspend disbelief in the face of authority.

Further reading

As far as the social sciences are concerned, Mead's major ideas appear in his *Mind, Self and Society*. From a social-psychological point of view, the articles 'A Behaviorist Account of the Significant Symbol' and 'The Genesis of the Self and Social Control' are important, and they are both available in Mead's *Selected Writings*. For a brief, but adequate introduction to Mead's work, see chapter 3 in Schellenberg's *Masters of Social Psychology; Freud, Mead, Lewin, and Skinner*. Blumer's reading of Mead is spelled out in a number of articles in his *Symbolic Interactionism; Perspective and Method*. For a challenging overview of symbolic interactionism, there is Rock's *The Making of Symbolic Interactionism*. For a more detailed in-depth account of the debates surrounding symbolic interactionism, an interesting collection of articles can be found in *Symbolic Interactionism*, two volumes edited by Plummer. Schutz's *magnum opus* is undoubtedly *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, but for those who want a less philosophical introduction to a phenomenologically inspired sociology, there is also, by Schutz in collaboration with Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life World*. Garfinkel's style of writing is rather inaccessible and jargonistic, and therefore Heritage's *Garfinkel and Ethnomethodology* might be a *sine qua non* for understanding Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Leiter's *A Primer on Ethnomethodology* reads well, and is an excellent introduction to various concepts and themes in ethnomethodology; so too is Benson and Hughes's *The Perspective of Ethnomethodology*. With respect to Goffman, it is worth starting with his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and then moving on to his *Asylums*, *Encounters*, *Stigma* and finally his *Strategic Interaction*. Philip Manning's *Erving Goffman* is a good introduction, linking Goffman to broader issues in social theory, though rather close to Giddens's interpretation. A more advanced secondary source on Goffman is *Erving Goffman; Exploring the Interaction Order*, edited by Drew and Wootton.

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