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# When Coleman read Garfinkel...!

by Roberta Sassatelli

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It is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has  
been speaking nothing but the truth  
Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

When it first appeared in 1967, Harold Garfinkel's collection of essays, *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, had a dramatic impact on American sociology. He was already well known as an innovative researcher, theorist and teacher, but *Studies* made his work available to wider circles. This book is unanimously considered as the founding block of ethnomethodology, which was to become quite a successful variety of social enquiry. On these premises, it is no surprise that the book was the object of a symposium which appeared on the *American Sociological Review* the following year. The symposium features a number of distinguished discussants: Guy E. Swanson [1968], who offers a Schutzian reading and recommends ethnomethodology for science studies, Anthony F. C. Wallace [1968], who despises Garfinkel's prose but supports his practical research methods and findings, and finally James S. Coleman [1968], whose comment is exceptionally harsh and dismissive. "It would be fortunate – Coleman wrote sarcastically – if the reader could leave the book (or rather the non-book: it is actually a disconnected collection of papers, some previously published, others not) after having read only Chapter 2. For the same point can be made only so many times: beyond that one must look for its fruits, either in theory or research. And Garfinkel simply fails to generate any insights at all from the approach" [Coleman 1968, 126]. One after the other, the various substantive chapters which made up *Studies* were branded by Coleman as either a "major disaster" full of "elementary errors," or as

providing us with “little of use” and elaborating “points which are so commonplace that they would appear banal if stated in straightforward English.” Such a vitriolic review was met by a resounding public silence by ethnomethodological circles, and has not been widely discussed in larger circles. We may well agree with Mullins [1973, 265], as he notices that “the slow movement of ethnomethodology away from structural functionalism produced a situation, by 1968, in which each side could ask the other unanswerable questions.”<sup>1</sup>

For someone attuned to ethnomethodology as I am, Coleman missed the important issues raised by *Studies*. Yet, I have always been struck by his review, and could never easily let it go. Indeed, I believe, it is as telling as it is harsh, surely a worthwhile read even today – as testified by the fact that it has been included in the monumental four-volume set on Garfinkel edited by Micheal Lynch and Wes Sharrock [2003]. Elements of Coleman’s systematic *misreading* and *misrepresenting* of what Garfinkel was about have in fact popped up ever since in the reception of ethnomethodology from many, different and sometimes unexpected, quarters. Reading this review today – after both Coleman and Garfinkel have entered the pantheon of sociology and have helped structure the contemporary field of the discipline stretching, as it were, its opposite boundaries –, is not so much an anecdotal exercise, nor mere historical curiosity: it is a sociological flashback which can illuminate the present and guide our readings.

## I.

To be sure, to start from this review and compare Coleman and Garfinkel would be a useful exercise. It could be a way to gain perspective from the current debates and consider yet again the boundaries of the sociological enterprise, contrasting the grounds, scope and consequences of two of its most radically different directions. All the more so, knowing that Garfinkel’s [1967] *Studies in Ethnomethodology* is still a landmark book in contemporary social theory, at least as Coleman’s [1990] much later intellectual testament *Foundations of Social Theory*. Coleman’s *Foundations* is widely acknowledged as the most lucid exposition of analytical social theory, itself a

<sup>1</sup> Mullins [1973, 259] maintains that “the fundamental difference between ethnomethodology and structural functionalism (...) was over the latter’s assumption of a stable system of symbols and meanings shared by members of a society. Hence, the typical survey does not consider respondents’ interpretive problems in answering questions. These problems are normally considered either 1) not researchable or 2) not important since the regularity of responses, and the way in which those regularities correlate with regularities in status or behaviour are considered more important than the interpretation of those meanings being invested in the questions by respondents.”

move away from functionalism. It posits social science as a discipline committed both to *re-construct the rational foundation of society* and to select *instrumental rationality* as the more efficient and more abstract way to specify individual *intentionality* and understand patterns of social actions carried out by individuals. Garfinkel, on his part, is sceptical of rationality and, what is more, he regards whatever rationale for action as an *ongoing practical accomplishment which is co-produced by actors and observers*.

We should take seriously the deep epistemological differences between Coleman and Garfinkel, as it is apparent in all their production. From such differences descend different visions of key social phenomena such as trust, rights, interests, collective choices, etc. For example, for Coleman [1990, 306 ff.] trust is a *purposive behavior aiming at the maximization of utility under risk*, with mutual trust as a form of social capital which cuts down the cost of monitoring activities. This is in line with the portrayal of trust within neo-classical economics: trust as a lubricant to exchange, itself portrayed as a non-easily substitutable commodity which may not be brought very easily. Garfinkel, on the other hand, conceptualizes trust as a *back-ground condition for action, a routine structure of expectations*: it may also be the object of choice, yet as such it is reflexively linked with choice, being at the same time the necessary ground for it. The father of ethnomethodology maintains that there is an “endogenous” order in everyday activities, and that there cannot be a neat separation between this order and the stories – including social-theoretical schemes – which explain it [Garfinkel 1988; 2002]. Experience is not at all chaotic because the actions which it is comprised of are accomplished in so far as they are organized in intelligible ways. The orderliness of social life is grounded on the mutual trust people display to one another, with the trustworthy person being that who masters the discrepancy of prescribed attitudes with respect to reality “in such fashion as to maintain a public show of respect for them” [Garfinkel 1963, 238]. Taken-for granted assumptions which constitute everyday life attitudes are shown to produce actions that confirm the individual’s expectations and how actors elaborate and stretch the existing rules in order to cover new events. Actors are not “reflexive,” yet their actions and discourses are, with participants in interaction attributing to one another a reflexive awareness of the normative accountability of their actions.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, while normal social reality is the “contingent ongoing accomplishment” of competent social actors, routines are of essential importance as “emergence products of the perceived normal values of

<sup>2</sup> According to Heritage [1984, 106-110], ethnomethodology marks a “new departure” from traditionally phenomenological notions of reflexivity, translating reflexivity from the subject (and his/her individual capacities of thought) to action (the reflexivity of accounts). See also Csyzewski [1994] and Fele [2002].

interpersonal events that members of a group seek through their adjustive activities to maintain” [*ibidem*, 188].

Reference to the very different conceptualization of trust in ethnomethodology and analytic/rational choice theory will be relevant in the following discussion. Still, clearly, the few observations above are just passing hints of what might be gained from a sustained comparison between the works of these two giants of sociology. Such a comparison is well beyond the scope of this essay. Much more modestly, these few pages are concerned with what Coleman had to say about Garfinkel’s book, keeping an eye on his rhetorical strategies, discussing how persuasive his abrasive arguments may be, and how useful his dismayed misreading may prove to clarify Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology a little more. In the wake of a new edition of Garfinkel’s masterpiece collection, this appears quite a timely exercise.<sup>3</sup>

## II.

Let’s thus take a closer look at Coleman’s arguments in his 1968 review of Garfinkel’s *Studies*. Coleman brushes over “What is Ethnomethodology?,” the celebrated first chapter of the book, and chooses Chapter 2 as a starting point. This is where Garfinkel famously introduces his ethnomethodological “experiments” which, by “breaching” the routine grounds of every day life, were used to reveal the “taken-for-granted” inherent in the social order. Coleman’s prose belies frustration at this heuristic device. He refuses to call it with its name, and quite simply misrepresent it. The breaching experiments are *belittled* as “projects carried out by students,” and *magnified* as the nut and kernel of Garfinkel’s approach [Coleman 1968, 126]. Coleman appears to play out a delegitimation strategy founded on a twofold move: *displacing* Garfinkel’s theoretical strength by suggesting it rested upon the curious, but slightly sadistic and childish, deployment of his students “embarrassment,” and *eschewing* the epistemological-theoretical confrontation which would have taken place should he had considered the first chapter.

Something like this also applies to Coleman’s critique of Chapter 3, “Common sense knowledge of social structures: the documentary method of interpretation in lay and professional fact finding.” Coleman reads it as a prescriptive text, as if Garfinkel was recommending the “documentary method.” The latter is reduced to two “hardly new” principles: firstly that “making inferences (...) requires the use of a variety of

<sup>3</sup> Originally published by Prentice Hall in 1967, *Studies* has remained in print ever since and has been reprinted as a Polity Press paperback more than eight times since 1984. A second, enlarged edition, edited by Anne Rawls, is due to appear in the course of 2007 for Paradigm.

observations to form, test, and modify the emergent explanations,” and secondly that “Verstehen, or understanding from the actor’s point of view, is necessary for many types of sociological analysis” [*ibidem*, 126]. Yet Garfinkel objective is much less prescriptive and much more radical, to say the least. This chapter aims to show the continuity between common and professional knowledge, considering the socially sanctioned grounds for inference in sociological matters from the perspective that “the discovery of common culture consists of the discovery *from within* the society by social scientists of the existence of common sense knowledge of social structures” [Garfinkel 1967, 76-7]. The target of Garfinkel’s writing is here nothing less than the theory of “correspondence” between what social scientists observe and the intended event which the actual observation is said to be evidence of. Garfinkel maintains, that for both soft and hard inference procedures (i.e. qualitative and quantitative research) “correct correspondence is the product of the work of investigator and reader as members of a community of cobelievers” [*ibidem*, 96]. This is ultimately an epistemological attack on conventional sociology which may well accept that social facts are not independent of perceptions, but takes it as read that we can produce concepts and measures that bring us closer and closer to social facts. As I see it, for Garfinkel, investigators are the *partial constructors* of social reality not because their concepts only *partly correspond* to facts, but because their work is a *co-production*. His challenge is to investigate such co-production by taking it seriously as a necessary empirical phenomenon, rather than considering it as a failure of human rationality which may be asymptotically remedied by analytical disentanglement of perspectives from facts, of accounts from action, ends from means.

The fact that Coleman decided to overlook the radical differences in epistemological matters between his position and Garfinkel’s is glaring and wanting. Garfinkel’s points are “banale” only if read through a blind eye for the quite specific status he gives to the “*taken-for-granted*.” The latter is a *continuously performed social construction* – neither a set of cultural biases which has happened in the prehistory of humanity and which befalls upon them even since (a reified “culture”), nor an ideology laid against what things really *are* naturally (a cultural “super-structure” which is overwritten onto nature). As continuously performed, the taken for granted is *lived* by *all*: observers and participants, lay people and experts of all kinds (although, I must stress, each is playing from within a different particular, more or less hegemonic, “language game” and from a different social position). As lived, the taken-for-granted is never fully accomplished – it is an *ongoing accomplishment*, which means that its production is both incessant and unfinished: as *necessarily performed* it is *necessarily re-worked* in the process. Garfinkel simultaneously tries to reveal the “taken-for-granted” and describes it as a particular type of “*ecceity*,” a *social fact*, necessary and

inescapable for every social being (including himself) in its both radically *factual* and radically *social* character [see also Garfinkel 1996; 2002].

Quite paradoxically, rather than entering the epistemological/theoretical dispute, throughout the review Coleman stages his frustration with Garfinkel being “more interested in the mechanisms of hypothesis-testing and in setting up rigid logical or mathematical schemes” than he is in “seeking to understand what is happening” [Coleman 1968, 129]. Coming from a Lazarsfeldian/Mertonian background, Coleman may appear here as just the empiricist voice, as against the Parsonsian heritage of “theory for theory’s sake.” At the time of writing the review, Coleman was already well established as both a major figure in the sociology of education, being mainly concerned with discovering to what extent an unequal structure of opportunities generates further differences in achievement [Coleman 1961]. Yet, as suggested, things are a bit more complicated. Garfinkel’s rewriting of problem-solving in a non-rationalistic way must also have been a major disappointment. Coleman was already writing on the theory of collective action from an analytical point of view, considering it as game-like situation in which different interests, with different weights according to a fairly rigid opportunity structure, can be seen to operate [Coleman 1966]. Indeed Coleman does not seem to contemplate the possibility that no social situation can ever be considered as perfectly correspondent to a game-like situation (not even games) when he criticizes Garfinkel’s collection because “there is no indication of how to recognize when behaviour is game-analyzable, nor any indication of what is gained through such analysis” [Coleman 1968, 129]. Coleman was also renowned for his mathematical sociology [Coleman 1964]. Hence, his dislike at Garfinkel’s use of tables and numbers both as visualizations of the taken-for-granted and as sources to be de-constructed because they reflect the background conditions of knowledge of the analyst (as in Garfinkel’s chapter on “Good ‘organizational’ resources for ‘bad’ clinical records”).

To be sure, such a strong but under-thematized epistemological distance would be more than enough for a potent clash. Still, the irritation which transpires from Coleman’s review has probably another cause, too. Indeed, the collision becomes intoxicating due to the differences (and similarities) in the ways these two authors decide to position themselves as narrative voices. The choice of *narrative voice* is no secondary matter. As I take it, objectivity (in science as well as every day life) is constructed narratively, and through their narrative voices experts seal the status of their knowledge [Clifford and Marcus 1986]. In this view, narrative voice can be treated as a key part of methodology. Now, Garfinkel’s prose lacks the simplicity and straightforwardness of Coleman’s. Yet, both their *textual personae* seem to rely on the adoption of a formal tone. As others have pointed out [Cohen and Rogers 1984],

Garfinkel writes in “a formal voice,” distancing “us” (the academic reader) from “them” (the subject of research) quite sharply. This is also a feature of Coleman’s texts. But similarities ends there.

Indeed, Coleman’s texts are quite intriguing from a narrative point of view. Coleman likes to play with *informality*, he courts the reader introducing an element of proximity with “us” by using anecdotes from everyday life. He also openly acknowledges that “he does not know” this or that, only to mark himself out clearly as “the author,” the master narrator of the text. Garfinkel instead distances himself from “us” and “them” in quite discontinuous – one may even say erratic – ways. He seems to play with his own *distance*, at once embracing his situatedness, and looking at it. He constructs texts which are detached and formal, but also “open,” comprising a variety of voices, which includes (and involves) the author as a participant in the social game, rather than as a master narrator. This way of writing must have appeared paradoxical to Coleman: redundant, disjointed, imprecise. Yet, it looks coherent with Garfinkel’s theoretical drive to make sociology again problematic and vulnerable to fundamental criticism as an outcome of accepted procedures rooted in common-sense understanding.

### III.

With the exclusion of Chapter 1, Coleman reviews Garfinkel’s *Studies* chapter by chapter. But he chooses as his main target Chapter 5: “Passing and the managed achievement of sex status in an ‘intersexed’ person. Part 1.” The discussion of this very long chapter – and of its contested appendix [Garfinkel 1967, 116-185 and 285-288] – occupies one third of Coleman’s review. This is the first sociological work in which the experience of “passing” from one sex to another was used to reveal the gender order in contemporary Western societies.<sup>4</sup> The semantic complexity of the term “passing” was certainly on Garfinkel’s mind, and indeed was taken as co-terminous with the rather complex situation of Agnes, the subject of this famous

<sup>4</sup> The term “gender” was not used by Garfinkel. My suspect is that this linguistic choice was a way to reflect Agnes’ voice, and distance himself from medical theories, strongly influenced by intersex theory developed for a small number of patients with sexually indeterminate genitalia by John Money, the very same doctor which Coleman calls forth in his review [Hausman 1995; Kessler 2002; Meyerowitz 2002]. Intersex theory saw gender as the psychosocial counterpart to natural sex, conceived of it as a fixed, dichotomous set of dispositions/functions in a way not dissimilar to Parsons’ sex-roles, and stressed that it develops very early in infancy as a function of one’s own genitalia thus recommending re-alignment of sex and gender by surgical intervention in intersexed babies. Robert Stoller, the principal investigator in the UCLA research team, was also a major player in the development of the notion of gender within psychoanalysis and beyond [see Stoller 1968 and note 6].



chapter.<sup>5</sup> In his writing Garfinkel recognizes Agnes as a person *between the sexes*, reports the many difficulties and pleasures *she* encountered in fitting in the dichotomous gender order, and specifies that *she* wanted to take distance from “transsexuals,” suggesting that the Los Angeles medical team he collaborated with also found that the way she was doing femininity was remarkably “natural.” Whatever the definition of a “transsexual” has come to be in contemporary medical protocols, a focus on cross-gender or trans-gender persons has become something of a standard heuristic move for gender theory and queer theory from the 1970s. Transsexual embodied identities – as well as other varieties of hybrid identities which are located between the sexes (intersexuality, transvestitism, etc.) – are still a hot topic among feminists and gender theorists today. They appear to go at the essence of what is a woman or a man, what qualifies a person as a woman or a man, and indeed if and to what extent the binary logic of sex category attribution is in any way foundational and related to biological diversity [Hird 2000; Kessler 2002; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Papoulias 2006; Sassatelli 2006]. Working in close collaboration with innovative psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, which is acknowledged at the beginning of the chapter,<sup>6</sup> Garfinkel does not seek the cause of transsexualism within its subjects, in their supposed biological or psychological normality or abnormality; on the contrary, he tries to provide a perspective on the cultural presuppositions on which the needs, wants, and interests of Agnes are organised and negotiated, and her right to undertake a sex-change operation is granted.

This essay is often used to illustrate the ethnomethodological perspective, and in particular the idea that it is through “*embodied*” practices that subjects continually create social reality. Social facts are made of flesh and bones as much as accounts and meanings. In such perspective, *identities*, even those that appear the most stable and immutable, such as sex and gender, are conceived as *ongoing, concerted and situated practical accomplishments*. Culturally controversial as it was – transsexual/trans-gender rights were, and are, a hot issue for medical practice as well as feminist and gender theory [Grabham 2006] – this essay is chosen by Coleman as a major target of criticism all but casually: “This chapter appears to be non only an ethnomethod-

<sup>5</sup> Passing meanings both to change, to cross; and to be recognized as, to be considered as. It is interesting to note that the term ‘passing’ was initially used to refer to racial passing, a genuine canon of Afro-American literature at the beginning of the century, epitomized by the famous novel of J.W. Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man*.

<sup>6</sup> To be sure, the case of Agnes greatly contributed to the history of “transsexual” medical practices. It is important to notice that when Agnes was referred to the UCLA team – comprising of Stoller, Garfinkel, and psychologist Alexander Rosen – the medical figure of the “transsexual” was still in its infancy. Physicians such as Harry Benjamin had started to treat transsexuals with hormone therapy and perform surgical operations, but these were still controversial for the medical apparatus, and when the use of surgery was legitimized theoretically, this was in terms of an intersex theory [Hausman 1995; Kessler 2002; Meyerowitz 2002, see also note 4].

ological disaster in itself, but also evidence of the more general inadequacies of ethnomethodology” [Coleman 1968, 129]. What is that Coleman so violently dislikes? A number of features, indeed.

I start from the narrative script of Coleman’s discussion of Agnes’ story. “Chapter 5 is based – he writes – on a series of interviews with a *male transvestite*, who at age 12 began to take estrogens and thus succeeded in giving himself the secondary sex characteristics of a girl. From the age of 17 on, he lived as a female. He *successfully fooled both Garfinkel and the medical specialists* (with the exception of one suspicious urologist) into believing that the estrogens were internally produced. Consequently the chapter is *based on the erroneous assumption that nature had faced this person with a choice being male or female*, thus making impossible the fulfilment of either role” [*ibidem*, 127, my emphasis]. Coleman opens by re-framing Agnes’ identity and proceeds by featuring himself as having “little experience in this area,” thus making what appears a sensible move, namely calling on an external expert to arbitrate. The latter is in fact John Money, the most famous specialist on hermafrodites [see note 4]. Money literally functions in Coleman’s review as an impartial authority, asked to provide evidence on Agnes’ case “the history of which he had already heard” [*ibidem*, 128]. And Coleman reports that, at his requests, Money “commented initially on the absence of any clinical write-up by a physician” and the failure to take into account that “such sexual deviates, who have no physiological departures from a single sex but want to undergo a sex change, are among the most articulate and persuasive persons he has met.” Agnes, Coleman seems to conclude, does not behave like “genuine hermafrodites or transsexuals” do, and to carry out a proper job the Los Angeles team should have discovered it.

To be sure, at face value, we may well say that Garfinkel had done what may appear as a strategic narrative error. The aforementioned Appendix is famous because it reports on the fact that one of the “secrets” which Garfinkel identified in the essay as fundamental for Agnes was revealed by her to the doctors a few years after she managed to get the operation. Contrary to what she initially declared, Agnes had in fact taken hormones during her adolescence [Garfinkel 1967, 297]. On the basis of this, in his review Coleman refused to give Agnes the status of someone of “dual sex” defining her as a “male transvestite,” always using the male pronoun. Coleman makes this move as if it were a way to restore truth and adequacy to reality, repeatedly underlining that “the boy” was able to “fool” Garfinkel. Indeed, Coleman uses the very fact that Garfinkel always refers to Agnes in the feminine as witness to the fact that he had been fooled. His strategy is to extract piecemeal information from Garfinkel’s text and re-frame it in a different voice. In particular, he relies explicitly on the hierarchical functional differentiation of scientific knowledge, unproblematically calling onto

Money to introduce the “real transsexual.” Through Money’s presence, he then posits a radical difference between nature and culture which is thereby commonsensically naturalized rather than sociologically thematized. Garfinkel’s essay can thus be evaluated through a vicarious and spurious inter-disciplinarity: it is not good enough sociology because it was not good enough psychiatry, physiology, endocrinology, etc.

Now, was Garfinkel really deceived? As much as this may appear as a *naïve* question, it has been asked time after time. Indeed, an academic debate has developed in recent years out of the interest in reading Garfinkel’s chapter on sexual passing. This is now often used to illustrate how texts can be read as social phenomena – thus addressing the fundamental role of the researcher (as scientist and social being) in the production of sociological authority [see in particular Denzin 1991a; 1991b, and the comments by Hilbert 1991; Lynch and Bogen 1991; Maynard 1991; see also Rogers 1992a; 1992b; and the comments by Bologh 1992 and Zimmermann 1992]. Before selectively drawing on such debate, we should take this question naively and recall Garfinkel’s [1967, 159] cheeky comments both about the complex relation that he developed with Agnes (from friendship, to deception, to intrigue) and about the fact that her “account was not to be taken at face value.” This may well suggest that truth is, borrowing Oscar Wilde’s words, “rarely pure and never simple.”

Still, such an answer may only serve to exacerbate the doubt, which will reveal itself to be a fundamental epistemological one: to what extent can we say that social fact are out there for the sociologists to be grasped, independently of their actions and representations? Can we solve the matter by saying that there are as many “truths” as participants in action, and perhaps give “space” to the marginal readings? The adoption of a post-modernist posture will not offer a convenient solution, either. Indeed, we should recall that such question has been answered in a fashion not too dissimilar to Coleman’s by self-defined post-modernist commentators, such as Norman K. Denzin [1990]. Even if he recognizes that “more is going on,” just like Coleman, Denzin seems to taken it as read that Garfinkel was initially duped by Agnes. Not so much because he was not enough scientific, though. On the contrary, according to Denzin, Garfinkel was not enough reflexive, he did not locate himself clearly, acknowledging his own embeddedness in the game of “doing Agnes.” For Denzin, Garfinkel failed to problematize his own sexual identity (he was also in need of “passing” as a male, writes feminist scholar Mary Rogers) [Rogers 1992]. It was thus his voyeuristic, logocentric masculine gaze which failed to go beyond Agnes’ feminine displays and expose the strangeness of her sexual story, thereby failing to “penetrate a problematic world of experience that for Agnes was primordial: the world of her ‘wild’ sexuality” [Denzin 1990, 208]. “Agnes remains an elusive subject who is talked about more than she talks herself” [*ibidem*, 207]. As a result, for Denzin [*ibidem*, 204], Agnes is

reduced to a trope in Garfinkel's text: she pays for her "passing" by being negated authorial privilege, while Garfinkel pays for such a privilege by his "ironic use (and dismissal) or Agnes' lie as support of his method."<sup>7</sup>

While further exploration of how Agnes' lived her sexuality might have been relevant to an understanding of the gender order, in a re-appraisal of Garfinkel's chapter stimulated by Denzin's paper, Lynch and Bogen have aptly pointed out that *Passing* is quite an experimental text in terms of narrative. They claim that, although Garfinkel was not trying to write a "decentered narrative" *à la* Derrida, "Agnes and the other personages in the story perform a kind of colloquy that surpasses, reflexively comments upon, and at times stands in judgement of the 'author' and 'his theory.' Far from being a kind of *deus ex texto* that assembles the characters and then speaks through them, 'Garfinkel' is relevanced by the texts in more limited and more circumstantially specific ways" [Lynch and Bogen 1991, 272]. The fact that Garfinkel's text is less monological than it might have been – allowing for a variety of voices to emerge (from dissenting medics, to Stoller, to Agnes, to himself) – is not taken as a sociologist's attempt to render the intra-disciplinary complexity and the interests clashes of the social situation at hand. It is this plurality of voices which allows both Denzin and Coleman to re-frame Agnes; yet they both do not acknowledge it. In their writings, Garfinkel's chapter is featured as either too authoritarian – i.e. not expressive of Agnes's interests and embodied desires (the post-modernist critique) – or as too libertarian – i.e. lacking objectivity, responsibility and coherence (the modernist one).

Whatever our theoretical persuasion, we should recall that Garfinkel's objective was very clearly not that of judging how reliable were Agnes' stories, nor that of considering the experiences of transsexuals as such: Agnes is used as a "practical methodologist" to demonstrate *what we take for granted in the gender order*. In the study on Agnes it is clear that what is in question is not an individual choice, but the dichotomised gender order and the inevitability of it being both taken for granted and working as a normative principle. Garfinkel was in fact interested in the "*structural relevance*" of Agnes' secrets; in other terms, he wanted to understand *how* she could pass, and not *what* was implied for her in passing. He did not operate with a framework of social action which contemplate individual interests as the *moving forces* behind action; on the contrary, he thought that interests must be described as *emergent phenomena* which contribute to define identities as social practices unfold. Such a perspective considers that truth is not an immutable given which can be concealed

<sup>7</sup> This may be contrasted with Foucault [1978] who edited the unabridged *mémoires* of Herculeine Barbin, a 19th century hermaphrodite, together with a number of related medical reports. Still, Garfinkel and Foucault are more similar than it may appear on surface [see McHoul 1986].

or revealed, but a social fact continually produced by members of a group whilst they carry out their daily tasks. In other terms, truth speaks through us as members of society, whether we are willing or not. And deception, like truth, is very much a collaborative fact – and a local, practical one. Truth and deception are thus seen to be “indexical” to trust as a set of background conditions for action and understanding. The Appendix in this light subverts the impression that Garfinkel relies on ethnographic realism (the authority of the “witness”): to enclose controversial information, in an unprocessed format and as a *post-hoc addendum*, shows us that he is willing to do something different than producing a narrative with the appearance of truth. Agnes’ story becomes in fact a “narrative in the making,” an unfinished process and a witness to the fact that people’s capacity to provide “good reasons” to others and themselves contributes to consolidate yet again new repertoires of action and speech.

#### IV.

To explore this a little more, let’s consider more closely what Garfinkel’s essay tells us about sexual passing and its medical circumstances. The fact that the Los Angeles team was in the main satisfied with Agnes “story” for the *practical purposes* at hand (granting an expensive and controversial sex change operation), speaks of what appeared as acceptable to (most) of them for a surgical passing – namely that her psychological and social identity as an heterosexual female had become so entrenched that there was no going back to masculinity, whatever her biology. Coleman writes that “Garfinkel missed an excellent opportunity to stand outside and observe the relation between the patient and the physician, as well as the hospital decision-making process in which both patient and physicians used each other for their own purposes” [Coleman 1968, 128]. True, Garfinkel does not focus on this relation, nor on the decision-making process with an analytical eye, as if he could provide by abstraction a set of exhaustive variables and mechanisms which may then be seen as corresponding with what had taken place. Yet, pursuing the notion of “reflexivity,” what had taken place is conceived as coterminous with the various accounts provided by the various participants. Correspondence is only another social fact – it is “indexical,” or meaningful only in relation to context, rather than being an index of how good the analytical work is.

Leaving epistemology aside, Coleman would have probably liked more emphasis on the arbitration of conflicts, on the composition of different interests. Certainly a collaborative vision of practices has been questioned as a possible bias of ethnomethodology within ethnomethodology itself [Hak 1995]. It is a risk which must

be acknowledged as the different positions that members have in the production of what is accepted as truth are indeed of vital importance. Yet, we now have learned (through post-structuralism and its painstaking discussion of the politics of identity) that these differences must not be reified either – something which is a possible risk when we adopt an analytical posture. More to the point, as suggested, precisely in this chapter Garfinkel inserted a number of voices – including different medical experts with different attitudes towards Agnes’ identity and right to pass. These voices precisely point to the diversity of experience, knowledge and power as personified by different players. For example, he includes a long note with extracts from Stoller’s reports as if to account for and displace the psychoanalytic reading: quoting Stoller, Garfinkel [1967, 153] distances himself from his medical construction of transsexuality “the operation had been performed primarily for psychological reasons; it had been the judgement of the medical staff that her identity was so strongly fixed in a female direction that no forms of treatment could ever make her masculine.”

Such *multi-vocality* is obtained mainly by *redundancy*: the chapter proceeds by circles of descriptions which come back on previous reports and add yet another, sometimes dissonant, element. This narrative structure is certainly not the most effective to provide a clear map of the conflicting interests at hand, it hardly offers a guide to disentangle the different voices in the text, yet it produces “a background murmur that supplies the text with a rhetorical surplus” [Lynch and Bogen 1991, 272]. This surplus not only de-centres the author, but also, and more fundamentally, offers different readers at different times, new opportunities to draw their own maps of the power relations involved.

Awareness of the indefinite, ongoing differences among actors in the situation may help us situate ourselves – and the various actors in the game – within larger institutional arenas and their pressures. The way this situatedness will be read, depends also on how these arenas evolve outside and beyond the specific text. We have since witnessed the coming out of such a diversity, with the growing acknowledgement that personal identities, including those which appear to have an essential foundation such as race or sex, are not only social facts but also political ones, riddled with conflicts and contradictions. And, recent scholarship on sex/gender passing focuses on the ruptures between different forms of knowledge about sexual identity. Although Garfinkel was only obliquely interested in “transsexualism” as an historical phenomenon and he did not directly discuss the role of medical knowledge(s) or the evolution of medical praxis, his work has helped a number of scholars which have done much to recognize that this arena is marked by diverse medical visions and interests that are not always in harmony with one another [see Fausto-Sterling 2000; Kessler 2002; Meyerowitz 2002].

## V.

Coleman has a point when he says that Garfinkel's interests lied in theory. In fact, it were not for its decentred narrative which allows Agnes to emerge in different lights at subsequent readings, we could say that Garfinkel made use of the study of a sensational case of passing like hers as a way to confront a number of fundamental theoretical issues: the status of individual purposive action, the gender order, and the nature/culture dichotomy. Throughout the paper, he offers quite radical readings of all these issues, readings which present themselves through detailed, multivocal descriptions of a single case. Let's take them in turn, while keeping them together (as they actually are) through Agnes' story, very much in Garfinkel's vein.

In *Passing*, the figure of the transsexual functions, to a certain extent, like Schutz's "stranger:" having to exercise a great deal of skill and reflection to make it as a woman, Agnes "was self-consciously equipped to teach normals how normals make sexuality happen in commonplace settings as an obvious, familiar, recognizable, natural and serious matter of fact" [Garfinkel 1967, 180]. As exceptionally articulate and persuasive as she might have been due to her social position, even Agnes was not the perfect instrumentally rational trickster. Her story is witness to the fact that it is impossible to exit the "normality" or "necessity" of social embeddedness. Agnes was simultaneously the same as "normals" and different: the same because like everyone she acted within the terms of significance which consolidate femininity (and masculinity); different because she was so much more aware that this was precisely what she was doing. Thus, if for the majority of adults gender and sexuality are usually ordinary resources to other ends – and "essential impressions" which are conveyed whilst one does something else [see Goffman 1976] – for Agnes the realisation of gender competence is, and tends to remain, as Garfinkel underlines, a "constant problem." Agnes, in fact, subscribes to a binary vision of the sexes, including herself in this. Precisely for this reason she is aware of the risks of degradation she runs, both in daily life and in the battle to change sex. Her behaviour is thus often similar to a *strategic game*: she controls the information she provides about herself, denies every possible masculine experience and underlines those aspects of her biography which were thought of as characteristically feminine. Her accounts, as Garfinkel points out, are often *anticipatory*, that is, they tend to resolve in advance any communication difficulty or interpretative ambiguity, tending to minimise moments of tension. However, this does not mean that Agnes is playing-out a role in well-defined game, that she is, in other terms, perfectly instrumental and simply man-

ages the impressions of herself, her body, and gender identity.<sup>8</sup> While she is more aware of the routines which create sexual identity than most people, her moves are *embedded* in social conventions, like anyone else. She is constantly *learning how* to be a woman and puts all of herself into using every occasion to understand how is “appropriate,” “right,” “natural” that a woman looks and behaves, thinks and feels, learning to align these different dimensions (looks and feelings, body and mind) of being female. As Garfinkel’s long quote of Stoller’s reports suggests, even keeping her secret about having taken hormones might not have been so important for her to obtain the sex change operation as it was to feel strong enough to sustain her female identity and to be a “legitimate” recipient of such operation. Garfinkel is quite open about the paradoxical position of Agnes which she clearly acutely felt: wanting to be a “normal, natural” woman, Agnes was very concerned not to bring her sexual identity down to her “wilful election” – with the “possibility that normals are more accepting of willful election than she was” [Garfinkel 1967, 125].<sup>9</sup>

Agnes’ feminization is self-presentation and feeling, inner and outer dimensions as well as back-stage and front-stage characteristics, revealing to what extent instrumental views the subject as role-player are misguided. Agnes *feminises her own gender* through adopting those characteristics that were (and to a certain extent still are) stereotypically associated with being a girly female, to the point of behaving like “the coy, sexually innocent, fun-loving, passive, receptive ‘young thing’” during her interviews with Garfinkel [*ibidem*, 129]. When she met Garfinkel, Agnes had already learnt to manage her sexuality as a “normal” woman would, *feminising her desire* according to feeling rules that feminist thought attributes to the patriarchal system – such as enjoying being looked at lustfully by men, watching over the feminine rivalry her appearance provoked, and especially evoking her submissive relationship with Bill, her boyfriend. Garfinkel hints at the fact that her relationship with Bill is ambiguous and unstable, a source of anxiety as well as of legitimation: Agnes strains to classify his reactions as totally positive, describing Bill as “the best thing that ever happened” to her, and re-interpreting his claim that an “artificial vagina” is “inferior” to a “natural” one as a sign of his him “harsh,” we could say masculine, “realism.” While he does not theorize it as such, Garfinkel shows that the complementarity

<sup>8</sup> Garfinkel distances himself from Goffman on this account, something which opens the space for a comparison between their position and which would require quite a sustained discussion of both, see Maynard [1991] and Sassatelli [2000b].

<sup>9</sup> As reported in recent studies [May 2002; Speer and Parsons 2006] in psychiatric assessment of transsexualism, the “genuine” transsexual is still someone who could not see his/her life other than with a sex-change operation; it is a necessary psychological need accompanied by the natural capacity to sustain for the whole of one’s one life a definite sexual identity that makes for a “legitimate” passing.



between the sexes and heterosexuality serve important functions in the construction and projection of sexual status. His work helps us think that the sorting of people into two, and only two, distinct sexes is essentially to prevent the subversion of what Butler [1990] has defined as the “heterosexual matrix.”

## VI.

Indeed, as narrated by Garfinkel, Agnes’ story offers a reading of the gender order that anticipates many of the insights of contemporary feminist thought: gender appears as a performance stabilized in everyday life on the basis of the accounts and practices with which subjects continually confirm that they are “real” men and “real” women. Gender is commonly seen as a given, a faithful representation of what the subject is deep down or by nature, above all in reference to different medical visualizations of the body (anatomical, endocrinological and physiological). Garfinkel, and further ethnomethodological contributions, shifted the emphasis from psychological motives or biological essences within the individual to external interaction or institutional arrangements, with gender understood as a routine accomplishment embedded in every day interaction [West and Zimmerman 1987; see also Kessler and McKenna 1978]. Agnes ends up adopting a particular type of femininity because it is that particular femininity which seems to work for most daily practices in such a way that it guarantees she passes for a woman. In the first instance then, her story can be read subversively as a meticulous dissection of the normative alignment between gender, sexuality and sex and the resulting pressures on feminine identity. That which Goffman [1971] defined as “normal appearances” were in fact fundamental for Agnes. While Garfinkel does not distinguish analytically between different dimensions, from his chapter it clearly emerges that Agnes was able to align her *sexual categorization*, through her ability to adequately stage the female *gender* and reinforce it through reference to *heterosexual* desires and experiences.

According to West and Zimmerman [1987, 132], Agnes’ first problem was “not so much living up to some prototype of essential femininity but preserving her categorization as a female.” I’d rather say that her problem was that of *embodying* this categorisation. Agnes’ story shows that corporeality is not an attribute of the subject, it is rather fundamentally, in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase [1954], “the being in the world” for humans, the essential but unfinished condition from which human beings move to experience reality. In particular, Agnes did not simply want to be publicly defined as a woman – something that she could achieve relatively easily even before surgical treatment thanks to how the process of ascription to sexual

categories ordinarily functions. In everyday life, it is not the assignation of a sex at birth, nor, given that genitals are normally hidden from view, the compliance with the criteria of assignation that determine the belonging to a given sexual category: in the majority of social situations actors act with moral certainty that only two sexes exist, so that if a person is able to convincingly *behave* as a woman, then she *is* a woman – and we certainly do not think to verify actual physical conformity (nor do we have the right to). Yet, the implicit assumption, that under an appearance of gender are the corresponding genital, is something more than just a ghostly presence: it is an unquestioned, taken-for-granted foundation, “natural” and “moral.” It is this foundation that transsexuals violate, at least until they are surgically realigned – we may think. And, after such re-alignment, they still violate it somehow – or so Garfinkel let us know reporting on the post-operative difficulties of Agnes with her “artificial” vagina. Whilst not explicitly identified by Garfinkel, his chapter on Agnes reveals the normative cross-referencing between *gender*, *sexuality*, *sexual category*, and *lived sex*. Agnes reveals the potency of the dichotomous gender order as a chain of referential attributes which accounts for both her need not to stop at the feminization of gender and her instable achievement of sex identity.

Such anti-essentialist, performative perspective on the gender order does not imply that all attributes and behaviour related to femininity are to be placed in just the same box or at the same level. Of course, the fact that with her appearance, gestures and demeanour, her speaking and telling, Agnes passes for/as a woman shows the “routinised character” of those background aspects which define femaleness. Sex – defined by the recognition of primary sexual characteristic – is nevertheless experienced and constructed as foundational. As a biological and metonymic vision of gender has become consolidated during modernity, genital conformation could not possibly be irrelevant to Agnes, no matter how good she may be at doing femininity, and indeed precisely because she is indeed very good at doing it. Garfinkel [1967, 122-124] explains that the “natural, normal sexed person” as “cultural object” has to possess a vagina or a penis, and where nature “fails,” there are manmade vaginas and penises. Medical intervention was, at the time, still justified as a “fixing” of nature; and nature was constructed, when it worked “properly,” as immutably and invariantly dichotomous. Penises or vaginas are in these terms “cultural events” constructed as “natural facts.” Indeed, broadly speaking, the chapter on passing allows Garfinkel to tackle, even though indirectly, a fundamental epistemological issue, summed up in the claim that “every reference to the ‘real world,’ even where the reference is to physical or biological events, is a reference to the organized activities of everyday life” [*ibidem*, vii]. The father of ethnomethodology problematizes the nature/culture dichotomy which Coleman was so keen to embrace. For Garfinkel “nature” is a social

fact, curiously sustained also by social actors which, at some level, clashed with the received boundaries of the “natural.”

## VII.

Now, let's go back to Coleman's review. Why is that Coleman so vehemently resists Garfinkel's rendering of Agnes? Clearly, he endorses the commonsense essentialist, binary and menonimic vision of gender and considers the “*pervasive functional complementarity*” between men and women as a “mechanism by which *biological sexuality is further polarized*,” [Coleman 1968, 128, my emphasis]. The study of Agnes thus appeared to Coleman to be not only a “colossal deception” but also an unfortunate *political* move. Coleman states that if Garfinkel intended to maintain that the law should leave people free to choose their own state of sex, then his chapter was a tactical mistake because “to use the biological deviation as a false front for the argument is to allow the argument to be destroyed on false grounds” [*ibidem*, 129]. In fact, the latter is what Coleman tries to do to Garfinkel's chapter, misrepresenting Garfinkel as having being fooled by Agnes, when he in fact painstakingly documents how she was engaged in the business of “passing.” And Garfinkel offers many hints of the different pressures which Agnes was facing to pass in “legitimate ways” – to the point that we can now re-read the chapter, and use it to consider how the politics of transsexuality has evolved. As suggested, the chapter in fact documents that “choice” or “wilful election” was not a legitimate justification for sex change. As politically indeterminate as this is, it may be used to obtain quite dramatic political effects. Garfinkel might have been no good as a tactical libertarian, but his texts has quite liberating effects, if anything for the heated debates that has engendered and continues to engender form all quarters.

This opens up a further trail for discussion. It helps us consider the politics of gender in particular, and the politics of research more in general. While he used Agnes as a way to focus on broad theoretical issues, Garfinkel undoubtedly has the merit of taking Agnes' experience seriously and recognising her elective subjectivity. He is thus miles away from those who maintain that transsexualism is a conformist and inauthentic expression of gender, invented by modern medical science in collusion with the cultural imperative of the male/female dichotomy [Raymond 1979; Szasz 1990; see Bolin 1994; Feinberg 1996 and Stone 1991 for a critique]. But he is also unwilling to travel the route taken by (some) post-structuralist gender theory and queer theory, that is to embrace diversity or what appears as subversive, crediting it with superior moral and ontological status.

While internally very differentiated, post-structuralist gender theory often makes a step that Garfinkel did not wish to make. Ethnomethodological indifference – the aspiration to study the justifications of actors “wherever and by whomever they are done, while abstaining from all judgements of their adequacy, value, importance, necessity, practicality, success, or consequentiality” [Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, 345] – doesn’t tally easily with the politics of the suppressed which, in a variety of nuances, is the code of feminist thought, even in its post-structuralist and queer expressions [Sassatelli 2000a]. For example, prominent theorist Judith Butler [1990; 1993] affirms, just like Garfinkel, that gender is a performance. However, in contrast to Garfinkel, and in concordance with the notion of symbolic power proposed by Pierre Bourdieu [1998], Butler asserts that, as a result of the fact that people take actions for essence, gender possesses a “compulsive force.” Its effects are *dissimulating*, favouring certain types of behaviour and hiding the fact that there is no essential biological fact to refer to as a ground zero. She emphasises that the male and female morphologies on whose basis gender differences are naturalised are always ideal constructions against which we all, in some way, feel inadequate. Thus the possibility of being other than the ideal is pervasive – a possibility that is often represented as a failure or deviation, though it can also be appropriated by subjects in a subversive way, mocking and ironic. Irony, personified by the figure of the transvestite, is presented as an important device for the overturning of the gender order. In fact, according to Butler, transvestites serve a potent function of exemplification which takes on subversive traits: they demonstrate that femininity and masculinity are ways of presenting oneself and of doing, based on imitation and learning, rather than immutable essences written once and for all in the body at birth or before it. From this perspective, and just like Garfinkel, Butler [1994; 1999] considers that different social contexts offer local rules which consolidate gender through ritualistic repetition and emphasises the reiteration of actions rather than subjective meanings. But, at difference with Garfinkel, she also accentuates the possibility of subversion, maintaining that, as “uninterrupted discursive practice,” gender is “open to intervention and re-interpretation.” All in all, Butler runs the risk to posit plasticity (of bodies/gender/sex) as yet another ontological and moral foundation, whereby all gender/sex/sexuality identities, except those which are spectacularly ‘passing’ or ‘crossing’, are merely the byproduct of repressive social structures.

The rejection of expressive views of gender and the use of a case of sexual passing is for Garfinkel a research strategy (identities divergent from the norm help put normative classification into focus). It has much less to do with what research is supposed to do, with the politics of it (marginal or deviant identities are seen as “practical methodologists” that shed light on the *status quo* rather than as having

the potential to break and change social reality). Clearly “ethnomethodological indifference” is a controversial stance. It may appear old-fashioned to the relativist. It seems an incoherent path to scholars of both positivist persuasion (as it is too close to “self-enforced neutrality,” but without its faith in the technical means for scientific translation of and correspondence to commonsensical reality) and critical persuasion (as local accounts and justifications are the object of study, but there is no special commitment to marginal identities). Yet, ethnomethodological indifference works on the assumption there is no alternative to local, reflexive and rhetorical practices, and that there is simply no question of the “correspondence” between these practices and “reality” (be it nature, biology, or something else) not because the latter does not exist, but because it is *co-extensive* with (or “reflects”) the former. And, given that writing as scientists we find ourselves always and already situated within an order of moves in some language game which presumably incorporates power structures, it may eventually be better service to all – including the marginal – for us to be open as possible to the game and generate, through openness and redundancy, quite a lot of sociological noise.

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## **When Coleman read Garfinkel...!**

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Abstract: This paper re-considers Coleman's malicious review of Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, taking into account its narrative script, as well as addressing his theoretical and political criticisms. Focusing in particular on Coleman's arguments against the celebrated chapter on "sexual passing" which have often been used against ethnomethodology, I look at Garfinkel's study of Agnes as a way to confront a number of fundamental theoretical issues: the status of individual purposive action; the gender order, and the nature/culture dichotomy. While Coleman largely eschews a direct epistemological confrontation with Garfinkel, he re-frames Agnes by relying on external medical knowledge to introduce the "real transsexual." Garfinkel writes a decentred narrative which allows Agnes to emerge in different lights at subsequent readings, rendering the text a research instrument itself and an arena for political discussion.

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*Keywords: Garfinkel, Coleman, ethnomethodology, reflexivity, trust, sexual passing.*

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