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Ethnomethodology as an Experimentation with the Natural Attitude: George Psathas on Phenomenological Sociology

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Abstract

My aim is to depict Psathas's position on ethnomethodology as a way of doing phenomenological sociology. On this, he contested with others who argued that ethnomethodology is not a phenomenological sociology at all. His claim was that ethnomethodology is a part of the phenomenological movement. In this dispute, he offered two kinds of arguments. On the one hand, he documented the strong phenomenological background of Garfinkel's ideas. On the other hand, he found in Garfinkel's own words expressions of gratitude to Husserl, Gurwitsch, and Schutz, among other phenomenologists. However, having proved that there was a close relation of Garfinkel with ethnomethodology, Psathas went on to show that Garfinkel turned phenomenological ideas into something new; in particular, he turned phenomenology into an experimental science dealing with the natural attitude. This is a groundbreaking contribution that Psathas appreciated and comprehended as no one else.

Keywords Natural attitude · Experimentation · Phenomenological sociology · Garfinkel · Schutz

Introduction

For some decades now, there has been much ado about phenomenological sociology. Something odd happens. Supporters as well as detractors of applied phenomenology in the social sciences mostly agree that there is not such a thing as a phenomenological sociology. Some believe that, as a philosophy, phenomenology does not belong to the field of the sciences, as sociology does. Some others believe that sociologists work with different methods and deal with different objects than phenomenologists,

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so they perform quite different activities (see Eberle 2012a; see also Dreher 2012: 153–158). Incredibly, everybody is enthusiastically willing to discuss something that they think does not exists… Fortunately, we have George Psathas who wisely put this debate on quite a different basis.

Psathas provided two main arguments in favor of phenomenological sociology; one descriptive, another programmatic. Initially, he was the first to realize that, in fact, there was a large group of people doing sociology in the name of phenomenology. He described it as "an intellectual movement".[1] Then he had this wonderful idea of getting those people together, organize a conference, and talk about what they were doing.[2] That meeting was so inspiring that a volume was edited (Psathas 1973), a society was started (the Society for Phenomenology and the Human Sciences), and a few years later this journal was founded. All this proves that—just as Psathas envisioned—phenomenological sociology *does* exist.

However, describing the actual existence of the phenomenological sociology as an intellectual movement—i.e., its factual existence—is not enough. Psathas elaborated a much more sophisticated argument. He proved that the very idea of a phenomenological sociology made sense and he found this idea in Garfinkel's ethnomethodology.

Yes, I said "Garfinkel's ethnomethodology". Then Psathas's argument is not about ethnomethodology in general, as a movement or whatever, but about the way its founding father conceived it. Most ethnomethodologists might not agree with the idea that they are doing phenomenological sociology. Nevertheless, when it comes to Garfinkel, I find Psathas' claim convincing. And this is what my paper is all about.

George Psathas' Stance in Polemical Context

In the following, I will depict, and adopt, Psathas's position on ethnomethodology as a way of doing phenomenological sociology.[3] I fully agree with him on this *nowadays*. However, that was not how I thought before reading him.

I used to think—maybe like many scholars still do—that ethnomethodology has nothing to do neither with phenomenology, nor with sociology, much less with both things at a time—that is, with phenomenological sociology. Garfinkel's ironies about "professional sociology," (Garfinkel [1967] 1994: 77) "literal observation methods," (Garfinkel [1967] 1994: 78, 102), and his claim that ethnomethodology was not anything like sociology or positivist science dazzled me. I was carried away by what Psathas portrays as "Garfinkel's brashness, outrageous neologisms, and in-your-face

[1] Psathas' idea that phenomenological sociology is an intellectual movement is broadly accepted. See, for instance, Nasu (2012: 11–16).

[2] In a way, one could see Bird (2009) as a continuation of this prolific idea that it is worth the effort to consider how its practitioners conceive of phenomenological sociology. In my opinion, his account is in line with the descriptive aspect of Psathas stance.

[3] On Garfinkel, phenomenological sociology and the Schutzian perspective, see Eberle (2012b).

critical undermining of established 'truths,' 'methods,' and 'theories' in sociology" (Psathas 2012: 29).

Back then my opinion was in line with those who, like Mary Rogers, argued that "Garfinkel has never himself claimed to be a Schutzian or a phenomenological sociologist and has eschewed all efforts to categorize his approach as anything other than 'ethnomethodological'" (Rogers, quoted in Psathas 2004: 32, n59). Psathas knew this position very well, and he contested it in a large endnote to his paper "Alfred Schutz's Influence on American Sociologists and Sociology". He was perfectly aware that Rogers argued that "ethnomethodology does not represent a phenomenological sociology" even if in some respects it "hints" at it because

> these phenomenologically relevant elements of the ethnomethodological perspective represent, at best, a narrow extraction from the phenomenological frame. Ethnomethodology does not build on or even make use of the far-reaching relevance of phenomenology. Indeed, one could scarcely infer the nature of phenomenology from ethnomethodology". (Rogers, quoted in Psathas 2004: 32, n59)

Against this kind of interpretations, Psathas claimed that ethnomethodology is "a part of the phenomenological movement" (Psathas 2004: 32, n59). Let us see what his arguments were.

Garfinkel and Phenomenology

Due to my previous believes, Psathas' assertion that Garfinkel had a strong phenomenological background and that he made groundbreaking contributions to phenomenological sociology surprised me. It was the most original position on this matter that I had ever seen.

Psathas' claim was not just that Garfinkel had been influenced by phenomenological ideas, among others and in a vague, general way, but rather that his "relation to Schutz was a long and varied one" (Psathas 2012: 24). This relation did not fade over time when he started to pursue his own ethomethodological program (Psathas 2012: 29). In his opinion—which I now share—"Garfinkel started from a Schutzian and phenomenologically influenced perspective (also influenced by Gurwitsch)" (Psathas 2012: 24f.). Therefore, "it can fairly be said that without phenomenology (via Husserl, Gurwitsch, Schutz, and Merleau-Ponty), ethnomethodology would not have developed" (Psathas 2012: 29).

Psathas offered a wide range of reasons and documented opinions about the phenomenological roots of ethnomethodology. Here I will stress the importance of two kinds of arguments, one based on Garfinkel's explicit sayings, another one based on his personal interaction with main referents of the American phenomenological movement. The first thing to notice as regards Garfinkel's relation to phenomenology is that he "not only praises Schutz but also borrows and incorporates many of Schutz's ideas and conceptualizations into his own work," mentioning Husserl as well (Psathas 2004: 2). So the strongest "evidence for Schutz's influence is to be

found in Garfinkel's own acknowledgments" (Psathas 2004: 19). For instance, he admits that Schutz inspired his dissertation, as well as some of his papers.

Indeed, in his doctoral dissertation—*The Perception of the Other: A Study in Social Order* (1952)—, he "drew heavily on Schutz's analyses in order to explore a counter position to that of Talcott Parsons on the nature and sources of social order" (Psathas 2004: 18). By that time, Psathas writes, he

> had read Schutz's various papers published in the 1940s and utilized these in his examination of Parsons; by 1959 he had incorporated and acknowledged his debt to the many ideas of Alfred Schutz; and at the time of the publication of *Studies in Ethnomethodology* in 1967, which consisted of several of his previously published papers. (Psathas 2004: 21)

Garfinkel himself added in the Preface: "For twenty years their writings have provided me with inexhaustive directives into the world of everyday activities" (Garfinkel, quoted in Psathas 2004: 21).

Garfinkel also admitted Schutz's influence in several other texts; for instance, in "Notes on the Sociological Attitude," where he tells Schutz that this paper "has 'drawn without conscience' from your writings. Specifically, the 'section characterizing the natural and scientific attitudes, with the exception of some additions from my own reflections, is a paraphrasing of your ideas as they are formed in your article 'On Multiple Realities'" (Psathas 2004: 17).

The second fact we should acknowledge is the personal exchange Garfinkel had with many of the prominent American phenomenologists of his days. For instance, Psathas mentions that, at Harvard, Garfinkel "met Gurwitsch with whom he had many discussions while also reading with him *The Field of Consciousness*, which was in preparatory stages (eventually first published in 1953). From Gurwitsch he saw the ways in which empirical examples could be used in phenomenological studies and the significance of such notions as functional significations and gestalt complex" (Psathas 2004: 16). Garfinkel even said that "Gurwitsch was an important influence in his thought," with whom he discussed important "subjects in phenomenology and sociology (Psathas 2004: 29, n44).

Then Gurwitsch recommended him to Schutz, with whom he discussed main topics of his dissertation such as (in Garfinkel's words): "the theory of meaning, the theory of objects, the method of *verstehen*, the role of motivation theories in accounting for change, the logical character of the subjective categories, and so on" (Psathas 2004: 16). He "met with Schutz many times and corresponded with Schutz over a number of years" (Psathas 2004: 23, n1). He even "traveled regularly" to New York "to spend tutorial evenings" with Schutz and "engaged in a correspondence with him" (Psathas 2004: 16f.).

In spite of the "explicit use of the phenomenological method" by Garfinkel and the close relationship with phenomenology that his owns words disclose, his views kept evolving (Psathas 2004: 20) and by no means can be interpreted as a mere repetition of Schutzian or phenomenological ideas. Furthermore, Garfinkel "eventually turned away from […] Schutz" (Psathas 2012: 25), probably in the 1960s. Psathas notes that Garfinkel's "citations of Schutz continued as he drafted in 1962 what became published in 1964 as 'Studies of the Routine Grounds of Everyday

Activities' and later included in the 1967 collection" (Psathas 2004: 20). In his opinion,

> it is fair to say that up until 1967, with the appearance of *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel and his students and associates still saw their work as not only drawing inspiration and conceptualizations from Schutz but as also being based on Schutz's foundational explorations of the natural attitude, multiple realities, common sense knowledge, and the distinctions he drew between common sense and scientific interpretations of human action. (Psathas 2004: 21)

Although at first Garfinkel found support in Schutz, later he moved away from him because he became "dissatisfied" with his methodology and thought that his work was not "empirical enough" (Psathas 2012: 25). Accordingly, ethnomethodology should not be considered a mere "continuation" of Schutz's sociology but rather its extension, elaboration, modification, and radicalization "in ways that would very likely not have been acceptable to Schutz himself" (Psathas 2004: 21f.).

Ethnomethodology as an Experimental Perspective

Garfinkel gave Schutzian phenomenology an empirical turn. As Psathas beautifully says, he "brought Schutz out of the philosopher's study … and into the mundane world of action and discourse, where members continually produced and reproduced an achieved social order in and through their practices" (Psathas 2012: 29). "His efforts to do laboratory stimulations of interaction; to create meaningless situations; to use recording equipment; to use lengthy interviews with his 'subjects'; all represented novel ideas and approaches which led him more and more in an empirical direction" (Psathas 2012: 24).

With this aim, Grafinkel "abandoned the phenomenological reduction and the search for essential features of phenomena" and "adopted methodologies which would enable a closer and more direct examination of everyday activities […, which] were designed to provide access to the taken-for-granted" (Psathas 2012: 27); i.e., to what is considered as "the basis for all other strata of man's reality" (Psathas 1968: 513). Therefore Garfinkel "expanded and also transformed Schutz's project" taking it to a new level (Psathas 1968: 513).

Unlike Schutz, who "was engaged in a constitutive phenomenology of the social world as persons operate within the natural attitude, Garfinkel was engaged in a constitutive sociology of the natural attitude's relevance, use, and functioning, as well as the uncovering of the social and interactional resources used by members for its production and sustenance" (Psathas 2004: 19). Garfinkel developed an approach to the natural attitude "exclusively and seriously" focused on the taken-for-granted world by "bracketing presuppositions" provided by theories and which he called "ethnomethodological indifference" (Psathas 2012: 26).

In order to "demonstrate the existence of the natural attitude," Garfinkel conceived "demonstration experiments," using the technique of

> disturbing or introducing a 'nasty surprise' in interacting with others in order to demonstrate the presence of much that was taken for granted […] by simply not performing those acts which they expected - or by performing acts which others did not have any 'reason' to expect. (Psathas 1968: 514)

Bearing this in mind, Psathas adds

> Garfinkel asked what would happen if the operative assumptions of the natural attitude could not be met in everyday situations? What would be revealed […] about the ways in which the natural attitude itself was sustained? (Psathas, 2012: 28)

In order to find an answer to these questions, he explored "persons' reactions to such breaches of ordinary expectancies, to difficulties in sustaining aspects of the natural attitude," which allowed him to uncover "what he referred to as 'the actual methods' which members use" to make the social structures of everyday activities achieve "their observable organization, sense, and accountability" (Psathas 2012: 28).

One could then say that Garfinkel turned Schutzian sociology into an empirical research program of the natural attitude. He found out, already in his early years, that the natural attitude—which Schutz described mostly theoretically—can be empirically explored. This is one of the decisive findings of his PhD dissertation. Back then, Garfinkel was "beginning to consider the possibilities for … a sociology *of* the natural attitude rather than one that operated *within* the natural attitude" (Psathas 2009: 425).

These early findings are a precedent of what might be the most powerful and instructive procedures ever ideated by Garfinkel, the "breaching experiments". To some extent, they work as a practical *epokhê* since they serve to alter the normally perceived, this time in order to motivate member's work for producing an order. They involve a bracketing of the "presuppositions and theories about the social world … or, at best, maintaining an 'ethnomethodological indifference' toward them; requiring a 'faithfulness to the phenomena of study'" (Psathas 2004: 22). These kind of experiments can also be seen as an expansion and, specially, as a transformation of "free imaginative variation" (Psathas 2012: 29) into an empirical research method.

Indeed, Garfinkel meant to "empirically study the ways in which disruptions of the assumptions made in the natural attitude are reacted to and made sense of by subjects in a situation demanding of choice" (Psathas, 2009: 405). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Garfinkel's masterwork, took this perspective to a new level. There he ideated a procedure consisting in modifying "the objective structure of a familiar, known-in-common environment by rendering the background expectancies inoperative," thus "subjecting a person to a breach of the background expectancies of everyday" (Garfinkel [1967] 1994: 54).

Later, in *Ethnomethodology's program,* Garfinkel continued experimenting with the natural attitude by other means. For instance, he used "inverting lenses" (Garfinkel 2002: 207ff.) in order to "*become strange again* with the ways of practical action as worldly stuff" (Garfinkel 2002: 210; Garfinkel's emphasis). The experiment revealed that in the "phenomenal details" of the "*in* vivo stream of practices"

there is "an invariant," "a structure," i.e., that "there are constancies" (Garfinkel 2002: 209).

Concluding Remarks

The saying goes, that Durkheim is an unmatched sociologist because he remains one of the few who actually made a discovery; namely, that suicide is a social fact (Baudelot and Establet 2011: 109). If this is true—I mean, if that kind of achievements deserve such a distinction—then we should provide Garfinkel a similar consideration. Making a discovery is indeed a very rare achievement in a science like sociology. However, finding a way—i.e., a method—to experiment with social settings *and*, based on it, not only make one but several discoveries (such as the indexicality of meaning, the accountability, the et caetera clausus, among many others), that is something we should praise much louder. These are the kind of things, which Garfinkel discovered. And Pasthas draws our attention towards them.

Certainly, nobody noticed the novelty of Garfinkel's work as clearly as he did. Some neglected them, some others purely and simply denied their existence. In a way, Psathas has vindicated the sociological worth of ethnomethodology by depicting it as a real—and I would say, as the only real—experimental sociology. In his foundational airs, Garfinkel did all he could to veil any relation to sociology, aiming at starting something fundamentally new. Many of us ended up believing in his own propaganda—until we read Psathas…

Garfinkel did the same thing as regards phenomenology. For years, he pretended not to have anything to do with it. At least this time he finally made it explicit that there is a phenomenological background of ethnomethodology. And there was Psathas, once again, to help us notice—and to remind us—of the phenomenological roots of ethnomethodology. And I'm grateful for that.

So, to conclude, let us make a balance of Garfinkel's relation to phenomenology as depicted in Psathas writings. On the one hand, he documented the strong phenomenological background of Garfinkel's ideas. He found in Garfinkel's own words expressions of gratitude to Husserl, Gurwitsch, and Schutz, among other phenomenologists. He also told us about personal meetings and correspondences with them. On the other hand, Psathas showed how Garfinkel turned those phenomenological ideas into something new. The most important novelty here—in my opinion—is the ideation of an experimental method, which is something very rare not only in phenomenology but also in sociology at large. Consequently, I will finish by saying that the true ethnomethodological revolution consisted in starting an experimental sociology dealing with the natural attitude. At least that is about what the reading of Psathas convinced me of.

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