THE REFLEXIVITIES OF ACTION: GREETINGS

The greetings exchange is an apt vehicle for examining the 'rule-governed' model of action, not only because it is a simple case, but also because unlike many other social activities it falls within the jurisdiction of a pretty straightforward rule. If we further simplify the case by focusing on the situation faced by the recipient of a (first) greeting, most members of our society could describe the rule which 'covers' the situation as being: when greeted, return the greeting. Moreover, most members of our society may have received explicit training (or at least prompting) in this rule, for example by being rebuked for not saying 'hello' back to a family friend or relative. We are here then, prima facie at least, deep in a domain where the activities of the participants can be adequately accounted for by reference to the rule. If the rule model cannot work satisfactorily here, it surely cannot succeed elsewhere. Let us then work through some of the reflexivities of an elementary greeting sequence.

Consider, to begin with, a situation in which a social actor is walking down the corridor of an office building, interactively disengaged from any others on the scene. From the moment this actor is greeted by another, his or her circumstances are radically reconstituted from a situation of mutual disengagement between the parties to one in which, at least minimal, engagement is proposed by the other. At this initial and elementary level, the first greeter's action has reflexively reconstituted the scene. Moreover, this first greeting transforms the scene for both parties - for the greeter (who moves from a circumstance of disengagement to one of engagement which he or she proposes, via the norm, will be reciprocated) and for the recipient of the greeting (who must now deal with this reconstituted circumstance).

In this context, and with the use of the norm for greetings, our recipient is now faced with a situation of 'choice'. If the recipient returns the greeting, he or she thereby reciprocates the proposal of interactional engagement made by the first greeter and, in so doing, ratifies it. In this case, the sense of the scene has undergone a further transformation from one in which interactional engagement was merely proposed unilaterally to one in which it is a bilaterally acknowledged fact. It is essential here to keep in mind that the scene does not remain unaltered by the second greeting. Rather it is developed and elaborated in a particular direction - the direction of mutual interactional engagement which was proposed by the first speaker.

Alternatively, of course, the recipient may not return the greeting. In this case, such a recipient will 'observably-reportably' develop the substance of the scene in a different direction - counteracting what was proposed by the greeter. Once again, it is essential to note that, although a circumstance of mutual disengagement may well ensue from such an action, it will not be the 'same' circumstance of mutual disengagement as existed prior to the first greeting. Rather, as in the case of the 'breaching' experiments, the re-reconstituted scene may well be accounted for by the participants (and reported to others) as an 'intended', 'produced' or 'motivated' outcome and, probably, as a product of good or bad reasons (Turner, 1971).

A number of important points about the nature of conduct and its normative organization can be made from this elementary example. First, it should by now be obvious that regardless of whether the recipient consciously 'chose' to respond in a particular way, he or she was nonetheless placed in a 'situation of choice'. This is so by virtue of the fact that actions reflexively and accountably reconstitute the scenes in which they occur. Thus regardless of what our recipient does - of whether the greeting is returned or not - the scene will be reconstituted. The unfolding scene, in other words, cannot 'mark time' or 'stall' for a while; it will unavoidably be transformed.

Second, it can be noticed that the norm 'return a greeting' may be used as an interpretative base for the scene, regardless of which among the alternatives of action the recipient in fact accomplishes. Thus the parties to the scene not only maintain and develop the 'perceivedly normal' course of the scene by perceiving, judging and acting in accordance with the dictates of the norm, they also use this same norm to notice, interpret and sanction departures from its dictates. The norm is thus
doubly constitutive of the circumstances it organizes. It provides both for the intelligibility and accountability of 'continuing and developing the scene as normal' and for the visibility of other, alternative courses of action. It follows, therefore, that whatever the outcome of the 'choice', the availability of the norm will provide a means by which the conduct and its circumstances can be rendered sensible, describable and accountable.

Finally, it may be noted that, once the norm 'return a greeting' has made an actor's 'choice' visible, there is available a great mass of interpretative devices in terms of which a 'non-standard' choice may itself become elaborately interpreted. Thus: recipient did not hear or was preoccupied; recipient did not know the greeter, or failed to recognize him, or thought the greeter was initiating a sexual 'pass'; recipient deliberately 'snubbed' the greeter as a social inferior, or sought to renew a quarrel, or to declare a state of enmity by visibly 'refusing' to return the greeting, and so on. And these interpretative resources are themselves accountably implemented by reference to the particulars of the actions, persons, places and circumstances of their occurrence.

Emerging out of this discussion is a point which is absolutely central both to Garfinkel's work and the subsequent traditions of research which he has stimulated. This concerns the role of norms, or maxims of conduct, in the organization of ordinary actions. A characteristic assumption within the theory of action, Parsons's included, is that the role of norms is essentially one of guiding, regulating, determining or causing the conduct which may occur in circumstances which are treated as if they are already pre-established or pre-defined. As already noted, within the terms of such assumptions, the theory treats the actors as cognitively equipped to recognize situations in common and, once the situation is commonly recognized, the application of common norms enables the actors to produce joint actions. Moreover the theory, we can now notice, treats the actors' circumstances as essentially unchanged by their courses of action. Hence the role of time as an essential component in the unfolding succession of 'here-and-now' reconstitutions of the actors' circumstances is ignored. Instead

time is treated within the theory as, to use Garfinkel's expression, a 'flat moment' (Garfinkel, 1952: 147).

Garfinkel's perspective, emerging as it does out of a preoccupation with the nature of 'common understandings', reverses this tradition of theorizing. Within his viewpoint, the common norms, rather than regulating conduct in pre-defined scenes of action, are instead reflexively constitutive of the activities and unfolding circumstances to which they are applied. The argument, described in the previous chapter, concerning the role of the expectancies of the attitude of daily life in the constitution of 'perceivably normal' courses of conduct is here simply particularized to specific, 'concrete' norms of conduct. Thus what the activities are, with all the subsequent interpretative elaboration of motive and circumstance, is only visible and available in the first place through the reflexive application of norms and maxims of conduct to temporally extended sequences of actions. Norms and maxims of conduct are, then, materials through which, via the documentary method of interpretation, the reflexive determination of the 'whatness' of conduct is possible. In this perspective, once again, the cognitive and the moral are deeply intertwined.

A concern with the reflexive accountability of action is the central pillar of Garfinkel's work. It makes up his central recommendation that

the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are identical with members' procedures for making those settings 'accountable'. The 'reflexive', or 'incarnate' character of accounting practices and accounts makes up the crux of that recommendation. (Garfinkel, 1967a: 1)

This concern with reflexive phenomena as applied to actions marks an entirely new departure from more traditional phenomenological treatments of reflexivity. Phenomenologists had long been preoccupied with the reflexive aspects of the 'hermeneutic circle', but they had characteristically treated these phenomena from the perspective of an observer who stands outside the events which he or she describes. Thus the phenomena of reflexivity have traditionally emerged (as problematic features when treated from a positivistic stand-
point) in discussions concerning the interpretation of texts, of historical evidence and, via gestalt psychology, in relation to topics in perception and cognition. Garfinkel's introduction of these same issues into the theory of action utterly transforms both their significance and the theory of action itself.

Introduced into the theory of action, the relevance of reflexive phenomena can no longer be confined to the essentially academic concerns of the armchair theorizer or observer. Instead, as we have seen, they directly enter as 'seen but unnoticed', but nevertheless constitutive, features of what the actions consist of and hence into the concerns and calculations of ordinary actors pursuing their daily affairs. For it is precisely through the reflexive accountability of action that ordinary actors find themselves in a world of practical actions having the property that whatever they do will be intelligible and accountable as a sustaining of, or a development or violation, etc. of, some order of activity. This order of activity is, as Garfinkel puts it, 'incarnate' in the specific, concrete, contextual and sequential details of actors' actions. It is via the reflexive properties of actions that the participants - regardless of their degree of 'insight' into the matter - find themselves in a world whose characteristics they are visibly and describably engaged in producing and reproducing. It is through these same properties that the actions' actions, to adapt Merleau-Ponty's phrase, are condemned to be meaningful.

These considerations further transform the theory of action as it has been traditionally treated within sociology by transforming the sense in which norms, rules, or maxims of conduct can be conceived as applying to actions. As we have seen, this transformation is essentially from a regulative to a constitutive sense of norm or rule, yet, paradoxically, this transformation can enable us to gain a renewed access to the question of normative constraint.

THE 'JUDGEMENTAL DOPE' AND HIS WORLD

In sharing a common preoccupation with the institutionalized and routinely ordered nature of much of social conduct, both Parsons and Garfinkel are concerned to provide for the ways in which routine institutionalized expectations concerning everyday conduct are routinely fulfilled.

It will be recalled that Parsons addresses this issue with his proposal that norms of conduct are internalized as need dispositions of personality. In this account, norms come to represent enduring directives to act in particular ways under given circumstances which are acquired as a result of the prior administration of rewards and punishments. In this analysis, a psychological theorem about dispositions to act and their sources in conditioning is invoked as a fundamental explanatory principle. Moreover, it will be recalled that Parsons's actors are treated as broadly unreflexive with respect to the norms they have internalized. The result is that his actors can neither adopt a manipulative or game-like stance towards the norms, nor are they capable of the reflection necessary to make a moral choice.

Garfinkel's rejection of this position is well known. It involves, he argues, a procedure in which models of action become based on entirely retrospective considerations. In this process, the theorist uses the outcome of a sequence of actions as the privileged starting point from which to work back to the 'necessary causes' which are presented as responsible for the actions turning out as they did. In this kind of analysis, Garfinkel points out, 'hierarchies of need dispositions, and common culture as enforced rules of action, are favoured devices for bringing the problem of necessary inference to terms, although at the cost of making out the person-in-society to be a judgemental dope' (Garfinkel, 1967b: 68).

What is being eliminated or suppressed in this form of theorizing is the range of contingencies, as interpreted by the actor, which may influence the actual outcome of a chain or sequence of actions. In Schutzian terminology, 'in order to' motives, having to do with the way in which the actor devises plans and projects to deal with the contingencies in his or her circumstances, are suppressed or eliminated in favour of 'because of' motives, having to do with the generalized backdrop of the actor's actions. The natural tendency of this kind of theorizing is a specious determinism in which, in the interests of accounting for the routine fulfillment of expec-