

Two Meetings I Will Never Forget

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BACKGROUND

I moved from California to Cambridge in 1970, to start my first academic position as an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Harvard. I had already heard of Egon Bittner and knew he taught at Brandeis. My fellow Ethnomethodologists (my specialty at the time) knew him as a ‘good man’, but not one who was on the cutting edge of our field. He had trained with Harold Garfinkel but EM¹ was not his sole focus.

At Harvard, I learned more. Egon had become the mentor and advisor for Harvard students, who were interested in Ethnomethodology and Phenomenology. They made regular pilgrimages to Brandeis where they audited his classes, and met with him individually. Students approached these meetings with some trepidation, and were more than slightly intimidated by his knowledge and intellect. Bittner could suddenly call you to account on some point of reasoning, revealing embarrassing, even scary, lacks in preparation. But for the same reason, they looked up to him, and eagerly sought his evaluations and approval. If Egon thought your ideas were sound, you really had something.

FIRST MEETING – PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

As a brash, optimistic young man of 27, I simply phoned Dr Bittner out of the blue, announced my presence, and asked for a meeting. He immediately arranged it, even though he had no idea who I was.

Our first conversation began in his office at Brandeis.² Rather quickly, he spoke with me openly of profound, even personal things, without distinguishing what he knew academically from what he knew from real life. He was a man of obvious depth who exuded a kind of passionate soul. He also had qualities as a professor and scholar that I sensed I both needed and lacked. It would take some years, before I could articulate clearly what I noticed intuitively that day – something about how his delivery seemed to highlight things within my own makeup, that were not quite put together right.³

As the conversation proceeded, I got a taste of what could happen when talking with him that might be intimidating. He casually mentioned certain people who look in the mirror each morning, and harbour plans and expectations about how they will become different and, in various ways, 'better' than they are now. He referred to these as 'childish fantasies' of (some) people, inexperienced at living. Oops – embarrassment arose, and I wondered if he knew that I harboured some of the very expectations he was talking about?⁴ I remember this episode to this day, but never mentioned my reaction to him explicitly.

Indeed, in important ways, I was inexperienced at living. At that time, I was one of those 'talking heads' that graduate schools can so often produce.⁵ We might be verbally intelligent, quick witted, perhaps creative and talented people. But our words and analyses formed a kind of autonomous, self contained, subsystem that was often poorly integrated with the rest of our personality and ways of life.⁶ To us, knowing something had come to mean, almost exclusively, knowing how to talk and write about it in certain ways. Egon was different. Much of what he knew he knew in his bones through deep, slowly digested living which had leavened and transformed his ideas. He was not a 'talking head'; when he spoke to you he spoke with all of him.⁷

To be fair, I was not quite this 'green'. I had noticed and overcome some of the arrogance that some members of my field, alas, had become known for. In ways, I was for real, intellectually, and I possessed qualities that were palpable and genuine. Perhaps as a result, we hit it off. There would be more meetings, more communication, collaborations, and a genuine friendship that lasted some years.

AN ORAL EXAM TO BE RECKONED WITH

Many of the qualities I noticed in this first meeting were revisited in a memorable Examination, which took place some months later.

Dr Bittner was already on the graduate committees of several Harvard students, and I asked him to serve on others. He and I were the advisors for an undergraduate, due for an oral exam to complete his independent studies. The three of us met in my office to start the exam.

Egon suggested we dispense with grading, and pass the student immediately.⁸ We had spoken with this student. He knew the material; and had done the work. Why not clear the way for a completely frank dialogue?

We would be talking about psychotherapy, in the context of Alfred Schütz's (1973) concept of multiple realities. The student postulated an alternate therapeutic 'reality' that could create certain assumptions and expectations that freed people to interact more deeply, and truthfully.⁹

In contrast, claimed the student, ordinary conversations within everyday life were typically superficial, mechanical – largely predictable. In such conversations, ‘people were not really talking to each other’.

Egon’s jaw dropped. He paused for a good minute and then exclaimed:

HOW can you SAY that?

I mean – you just did (say it) – ...

But How can you SAY that?

Initially stunned the student attempted a defence.¹⁰ Ordinary conversations are governed by tacit, taken for granted structures and social norms – typified openings and closings, rules for maintaining or changing a topic, rules for turn taking and connecting one utterance to another.¹¹ All these operate independently of an individual’s personal makeup and inner needs.¹² Is not talk therapy an attempt in part, to overcome these constraints, and create an environment where people can communicate more honestly, and personally – more ‘for real’?

Bittner replies:

No – a misunderstanding here.¹³ Certainly some conversations facilitate different things than others, but – ‘not really talking to each other’? It is through the very mechanisms of ordinary conversation that people recurrently communicate ‘deeply’ and ‘for real’. They affect each other dramatically, exhibit commitment and morality, express sensitively in all sorts of emotional, contextual, personal, and consequential ways.¹⁴ Bittner went on to cite example after example of this, with descriptions and explanations.

Then, he broadened the discussion – correcting the student’s understanding of multiple realities. Schütz’s multiple realities – the reality of the play, the movie, of theorising, of dreaming – this ‘therapeutic’ reality the student spoke of¹⁵ – were not *Alternatives* to the Reality of Everyday Life – they were not ‘Insteads’. These specialised domains all occur within, and are grounded by, the tacit assumptions of, everyday reality. It is in exactly this way that everyday life is the Paramount Reality.¹⁶

As he expounded on this theme the sense of an oral exam seemed to fade. He turned away from the student toward me, quite filled with emotion, almost pleading, as he emphasised the point, ‘Don’t you see? Everyday Life is the Paramount Reality!’ It was as if Bittner wanted anyone and everyone to understand. He would have explained this point to the janitor, had she or he entered the room at this time. What was happening in the room was no longer an exam. It was Socrates speaking about something important, to anyone and everyone who would listen.

The student (of course) was overwhelmed – literally speechless. After some amenities, he left the room with his passing grade. He may or may not have received what was offered.

What I had witnessed that day was pure teaching, in its essence. I had never participated in an oral exam like this, nor would I ever, in years to come.

NOTES

1. EM has become the common abbreviation for Ethnomethodology, founded by Harold Garfinkel.
2. The conversational snippets reported here are memories, reconstructions, and dramatic recreations. I have no basis for claiming literal accuracy.
3. David Sudnow (1978) described this more technically. He drew an analogy between playing improvisational jazz and the ongoing production of speech while conversing. Both were done with the entire body and there were certain physical and somatic prerequisites for doing these things creatively, genuinely, and well.
4. Story telling is, of course, is a time honoured tactic used by spiritual teachers and other mentors, to suggest something to a student in a gentle way. So, I must continue to wonder if this story was intentional, or incidental.
5. This phrase is more than a metaphor for many academics. In this regard, I recall a telling conversation between myself, a graduate student specialising in somatic awareness, and Harvard's mathematical sociologist, Harrison White. The student complained that academics seem to regard their bodies as merely something to carry their heads around. White replied immediately, 'Doesn't everyone think that way?'
6. The French psychologist, Ted Kompanetz (personal communication), noted that this is a way in which evolution has built human beings 'badly'. New patterns of response can be created piecemeal, especially when coping with urgent problems, with no automatic, psychological mechanisms to coordinate and reconcile them with the rest of the self. Conflicts and fragmentation can easily result. Mechanisms such as Cognitive Dissonance, and Freud's principle of minimising anxiety do not integrate: They solve conflicts, rather crudely (and often retrospectively) by suppressing, invalidating, or negating one part of the self in order to allow another part to function.
7. Sudnow's (1978) observations anticipated a flood of research in emotion, neuroscience, and cognitive linguistics in later years.
8. Harvard students always needed, at minimum, a 'B'. And it was part of student lore that it was hard to get into Harvard; but once you did, 'No matter what you do you get a B'. With a few rare, but painful, exceptions this lore seemed to have a basis in fact, in these years.
9. We all recognised the existence of many kinds of therapy and therapy talk. The unitary term, 'therapy' is used here as a time-saving gloss.

10. The student, in fact, was attempting to reconcile his readings in Ethnomethodology and Phenomenology with the work of Harvey Sacks and colleagues, who pioneered what later came to be known as Conversational Analysis (CA).

11. In the interest of accuracy, rules of turn taking, opening and closing conversations and so on were articulated more explicitly in published papers that appeared after this exam. However, the student was familiar with work in CA and, in those times, a variety of unpublished papers circulated among these students.

12. The student's confusion is understandable, common, and multi-layered. He had learned of rules and structures that both produce and constrain everyday life and conversation. It is tempting to believe one can escape these constraints by moving outside of everyday reality and ordinary conversation. Yet, one of Ethnomethodology's deepest insights is that certain basic 'constraints' accompany all human life that is in some sense, 'social'. In Garfinkel's words, 'There is no time out, no relief'.

13. I vary, sometimes drastically, from correct English usage for dramatic effect in order to create a sense of 'voice' in this narrative. For this, I ask the reader's indulgence.

14. A few years later Bittner's point was described more technically in the 'simplest systematics' paper (Sacks et al. 1974). It was by knowing and using social rules that were 'context-free' that people could communicate in ways that were sensitive to a particular place, time, personal situation, or individual. In this sense, such rules were simultaneously context-free and context-sensitive.

15. Later research by CA practitioners on therapy validated a version of Bittner's point: Most therapy talk is not a communicative form, different than conversation. It is a *kind* of conversation, achieved by adjusting certain rules and norms to a special kind of context. Of course, CA does acknowledge structurally different forms of communication such as courtroom procedure, or classroom lecturing.

16. In CA, 'conversation' is used technically as a form of communication governed by certain rules and structures that are social, cognitive, and linguistic. Yet, the tacit assumptions and expectations that create the world of everyday life were meant by Schütz to be phenomenological in nature. They permeate every type of cognitive awareness. It was never clear to this student (or us!), if by 'therapeutic reality' he meant a phenomenological sub-reality like the reality of dreams, a socio-linguistic form of communication like 'therapy talk', or both.

REFERENCES

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