

# Sociological Theory



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## Autonomy and Credibility: Voice as Method\*

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*Although little noticed by practicing theorists, narrative voice influences theoretical work. This essay presents a demonstration of voice as method, concentrating on brief segments of works by Garfinkel and Goffman. We attend to two methodological themes: how theorists use voice to establish intellectual autonomy, and how the use of voice influences credibility with readers. Garfinkel maximizes his autonomy by using narrative techniques that isolate him from his readers, and produce little common context with them as a result. Goffman maintains a context for credibility with his readers by using a personal voice, but he uses this voice to request their indulgence as he follows his autonomous muse. Goffman's narrative self-indulgence prevents him from fashioning a coherent theoretical program for his readers, something Garfinkel's distant voice enables him to achieve.*

Economist Donald McCloskey (1985), sociologist Richard Harvey Brown (1987), anthropologist James Clifford (1986), and feminist theorist Sandra Harding (1991) are only a few of the scholars broadly studying the discursive constitution of science. Their work shows how objectivity is constructed narratively, how rhetoric affects the reception of scientific works, and how "professional knowledge producers" (Fuchs 1986:127) seal narratively their ownership of that knowledge. In narrower form, concern with "textual technologies" (Smith 1992:93) translates into literary analyses of scientific texts (Green 1988; Hyman 1962; Jameson 1988; Lofland 1980; Peter Manning 1980; Masuzawa 1988; Wolff 1988). These works focus on style, metaphor, and artifices historically associated with literary aesthetics.

Neither the broader nor the narrower approach to scientific texts treats narrative voice as part and parcel of a theorist's methodology. Nor, for that matter, do contemporary metatheorists (e.g., Ritzer 1993), despite their keen interest in disassembling the taken-for-granted dynamics of theoretical work. Indeed, "voice" receives sustained attention mostly in the "composition literature" (Cherry 1988:252). To be sure, all of us can recognize the particular ways in which theorists address both their subject matter and their readers when someone points to these twin elements of narrative voice. For the most part, however, the methodological implications of a theorist's narrative voice remain "seen but unnoticed," to borrow Harold Garfinkel's pertinent phrase.

The methodological significance of narrative voice tends to be obscured by the widespread belief that the way theorists address their subject matter and their readers has much

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to do with style but little to do with their analysis. This belief presupposes that preferences in voice vary with authors' tastes and that authors can articulate the same theoretical insights and conduct the same kinds of analysis using any voice they like. This distinction between narrative style and theoretical content may seem to make sense because no one can infer or deduce a particular topic or theme from any given narrative position. On this account, however, methodological preferences of all kinds would seem to boil down to scholars' arbitrary tastes. In reality, although social scientific methods neither define the substance of a scholar's research nor determine its results, methods of all kinds influence the course and outcome of analyses in less determinative but still discernible ways.

Rather than determining content, methods provide scholars with a distinctive analytical slant toward their subject matter. Every method permits us to say a range of things about a given topic while making it difficult to say a range of other things. Thus, to investigate a theorist's narrative voice in methodological terms is to study how her voice enables her to articulate certain observations about a problem or phenomenon and how it inhibits her from articulating others. Consider a rather blunt, heuristically useful example. A theorist can effectively use a polemical voice to pinpoint the weaknesses she rejects, but a theorist intent on constructing a rapprochement between antagonistic ideas would have much less success when using a polemical voice because such a voice feeds the very partisanship that a rapprochement overcomes.

Though a methodological approach to narrative voice may seem novel, it actually builds on understandings of method widely accepted by social theorists today. Empirical methods enable social scientists to systematically gather data pertinent to a particular hypothesis or point of view. Theorists employ methods for somewhat different ends, such as promulgating overarching themes or proposing new conceptual images of broadly defined social structures and processes. On a narrow, empiricist understanding, theoretical methods may seem to be confined to issues of technique such as concept formation, deduction, induction, and logics of inference. After absorbing the lessons of Weber, Kuhn, Alexander, and others, however, informed theorists construe their methods more broadly to include such considerations as epistemological rationales for theoretical analysis, the value relevance of concepts and substantive problems, and the influence of metaphysical presuppositions on basic concepts and propositions. In addition to spawning a host of metatheoretical themes, this understanding of method raises questions about the theorist's position in the development of knowledge. We now hold theorists responsible for metatheoretical choices that establish their distinctive approach to the social phenomena they address. The more original the theorist, the more novel his metatheoretical position toward his subject matter is likely to be. Even theorists unattuned to their metatheoretical preferences make their positions known through the implications of their work.

With this image of the theorist, we can approach narrative voice seriously in methodological terms. It is always possible, and often useful, to consider how a given author uses specific narrative techniques to compose and communicate specific ideas—for example, how she frames observations, cites established findings, introduces original points, and qualifies or defends controversial arguments. For example, an author whose narrator burdens her exposition with too many qualifications may seem ultimately to introduce no original thoughts. Another author, whose narrator favors blunt assertions, may succeed in expressing some original thoughts but may be blinded to the subtle nuances and ambiguities of the work.

Despite the utility of studying specific techniques, we seldom refer to narrative voice one technique at a time. More often we speak of a narrative persona that an author explicitly or implicitly creates in a text through the conjunction of various techniques. A

textual narrator should not be confused with the biographically situated author of a text. Certainly an author's personal ambitions, intellectual milieu, and position in relevant social networks, as well as his existential character, influence his textual identity. In Erving Goffman's (1974:294) terms, an authorial self always peeks through the narrator's role. The personal biography and social conditions that dispose a given author to assume a narrative role open fruitful lines of inquiry into the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge. Yet the act of writing demands a degree of conciseness that dramatically mutes many aspects of the author's self-identity as he adopts a narrative role in his text.

Like other roles, "narrator" comprises institutionalized expectations that variably allow the expression of a distinctive persona. In academe, as in other institutional arenas, *normal discourse* prevails—that is, discourse "conducted within an agreed-upon set of conventions about what counts as a relevant contribution, what counts as having a good argument for that answer or a good criticism of it" (Rorty 1980:320). Normal academic discourse, for instance, "alienates and occludes the standpoint of experience" while "suppress[ing] . . . the local and particular as a site of knowledge" (Smith 1990:4, 18). Even though normal academic discourse encourages authors to assume an impersonal voice, some texts signal the presence of distinctive narrators. For example, the voices of Robert Merton, James Coleman, and Arthur Stinchcombe constitute normal discourse in American social theory but can be distinguished reliably from one another.

Other sociological voices are dramatically distinct, suggesting a textual persona that virtually stretches the role of narrator to its limits. Here *abnormal discourse* emerges, namely "what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside" (Rorty 1980:320). Among sociological theorists, professional training makes the latter eventuality—a sort of narrative deviance—much likelier than discursive ignorance. In any case we use Richard Rorty's distinction to postulate a continuum where one pole represents the hegemonic forms of discourse within some institutional sphere (normal discourse) and the other pole represents emergent or alternative forms within that sphere (abnormal discourse). The more an author leans toward abnormal discourse, the more her narrative voice distinguishes itself from those of her discursive counterparts and the more she creates a textual persona recognizable by her readers. The narrator constituted through abnormal discourse can assume methodologically innovative positions as well. As Dorothy Smith's observations imply, one method of "abnormalizing" the role of narrator is to bring personal experiences to the narrative fore while making a cognitive resource of the "local and particular." Another method is to exaggerate what Smith (1990:4) calls the "magisterial forms of objectifying discourse."

Although narrative voice ultimately involves both how an author plays the role of narrator (production) and how readers experience the narrator's demeanor and message (reception), we accentuate production so as to explore methodological aspects of narrative voice. Here we limit ourselves to two aspects of abnormal discourse that exemplify the two aforementioned methods of producing such discourse within sociological theory. Interestingly, these two methods implied by Smith's work parallel two academic personae discussed by Howard S. Becker. Becker suggests that one such persona "emphasizes the differences between 'us' and 'them'"; textual indications of this persona include "fancy language, big words for little ones, esoteric words for commonplace ones, and elaborate sentences making subtle distinctions" (Becker 1986:33, 34). Becker describes a second persona as the "Will Rogers line," which "emphasize[s] our similarity to ordinary people, rather than the differences"; textual indicators include "writ[ing] more informally favor[ing] the personal pronoun, and appeal[ing] to what we-and-the-reader know in common rather than what we know and the reader doesn't" (Becker 1986:36, 37).

AUTONOMY AND CREDIBILITY IN GARFINKEL AND GOFFMAN:  
A DEMONSTRATION OF VOICE AS METHOD

We introduced the preceding observations with specific topics in mind. As useful as abstract discussion may be, nothing takes the place of analyzing specific voices to demonstrate the insights to be gained by conceiving narrative voice in methodological terms. *Demonstrate* is the operative verb; the idea of voice as method is too new—and the space of an article too brief—to make a categorical survey of all relevant themes worthwhile. Our aim is to demonstrate the methodological implications of narrative voice, using two “abnormal” voices at great distance from each other both in terms of Smith’s distinction between personalizing and objectifying narration and Becker’s distinction between textual personae that speak to “us” and to “them.” To keep matters manageable, we concentrate on two methodological issues that are particularly sensitive to the alternative positions described by Smith and Becker. On the one hand, we attend to how our narrators establish autonomy in their texts—that is, how they create positions in relation to their subject matter and their readers that enable them to introduce original insights and creative thought. On the other, we attend to how our narrators establish credibility in their texts—that is, how they establish the cogency of their arguments for readers. To these issues we add another twist. The narration of original insights and the narration of credible insights often work at cross-purposes to one another. We observe how our narrators deal with these tensions and examine some of the resultant strengths and weaknesses in their methodological positions.

In this study we examine works by Harold Garfinkel and Erving Goffman, whose departures from normal academic voice and theoretical originality attracted us. Each carries one type of narration toward a polar extreme: Garfinkel writes in a formal voice, distancing “us” from “them” more strongly than does academic discourse; Goffman writes in a personal voice, drawing “us” and “them” closer together than ordinary discourse allows, albeit in a manner quite distinct from Becker’s “Will Rogers line.” Garfinkel and (especially) Goffman’s voices already have sparked considerable interest (e.g., Atkinson 1989; Drew and Wooten 1988; Heritage 1984; Lofland 1981; Peter Manning 1980; Philip Manning 1991).<sup>1</sup> Seeking neither to reconcile nor to reject these interpretations, nor to illustrate consistencies in voice across our narrators’ entire body of texts, we juxtapose Garfinkel’s and Goffman’s voices, using brief segments of their work that let us observe at close range how they manage their narratives. From Garfinkel we select “What Is Ethnomethodology?”, the introductory chapter of *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967); from Goffman, the “Introduction” to *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (1974).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Although Garfinkel and Goffman each employ distinctive methods, neither provides a methodological key to his work. Commentators, however, have taken the first steps toward an understanding of their respective methods (e.g., Pollner 1991; Williams 1988). Here we do not aim at a comprehensive account of Garfinkel’s or Goffman’s methods. More generally, we believe that inquiries into narrative voice alone cannot account completely for a theorist’s methods. Rather, we claim that narrative voice is only one dimension of method among others.

<sup>2</sup> As observed by one of the anonymous readers of an earlier draft for *Sociological Theory*, the voice Goffman assumes in the “Introduction” to *Frame Analysis* differs in certain techniques from the narrative techniques he uses in the remainder of his text. This reader’s point is well taken. (Garfinkel’s voice in his introduction appears to us to be closer to the voice he employs in the remainder of his work.) Yet as John O’Neill (1981) proposes in an insightful essay that anticipates our general understanding of Goffman’s intent, Goffman uses his introduction to dispose readers to his sensibility and his intentions. Thus it seems to us legitimate to examine his narrative voice in the “Introduction” insofar as we are interested in how he methodologically establishes his distinctive position toward his subject matter and his readers.

*Garfinkel's Narrative Voice*

Both Garfinkel and Goffman draw attention to what goes unsaid during mundane social encounters, but Garfinkel—unlike Goffman—leaves no unequivocal traces of a self-conscious narrator soliciting readers' goodwill. Garfinkel, however, is scarcely the first sociologist to impose a demanding style on readers without explanation. According to Marianne Weber ([1926]1975:675), Max Weber resignedly believed that readers of *Economy and Society* would probably "shake their heads" at his wooden exposition. Talcott Parsons (Garfinkel's dissertation advisor) acknowledged his own difficult style only in passing ([1937]1968:xxiii–xiv). Garfinkel's narrative affinity with Weber and Parsons signals his preference for leaving few personal traces in his text; each of these theorists leaves his assertions to stand or fall on the anonymous force of the theoretical prose itself. For these sociologists, conversational strategies appear only occasionally as rhetorical devices serving didactic ends.

In Garfinkel's hands, narrative didacticism entails a formal, self-certain voice. His penchant for unusual grammar and syntax largely obscures his narrator's great confidence that he has something of utmost importance to say. In the first paragraph of the aforementioned opening chapter, Garfinkel's narration is as certain as it is impersonal:

The following studies seek to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right. Their central recommendation is that the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized daily affairs are identical with members' procedure for making these settings "accountable" (1967:1).

Here Garfinkel constitutes impersonality by making "the studies," not Garfinkel, the subject of the first sentence. The second sentence achieves the same effect more pointedly by implying that the studies themselves recommend something. The narrator's impassive style conveys no hint, much less acknowledging any possibility, that his own slant systematically influences what the studies have to say. The studies appear self-validating in that they make no allowance for challenges of any kind.

Garfinkel, like most theorists who use formal narration, adopts an impersonal voice that distances his thoughts from his readers' common experiences. Thus he creates a distinctive division between "us" and "them." His opening sentences address readers as if they are students at a lecture on a demanding topic. Like most lecturers, and most formal narrators as well, Garfinkel announces his purposes and plans, albeit in unusually systematic and repetitive fashion (1967:4, 11, 31–34). His agenda-setting statements are unusually forceful as well, virtually insisting that readers understand matters this way: "Whenever studies of practical action and practical reasoning are concerned, these consist of the following . . ." (p. 4); "The demonstrably rational properties of indexical expressions and indexical actions is an ongoing achievement of the organized activities of everyday life. Here is the heart of the matter" (p. 34). Garfinkel's emphatic narration in effect seals him off from virtual dialogue with his readers. This method is analogous to the lecturer's proceeding self-confidently without pausing to see whether the audience agrees.

Garfinkel reinforces his lecturelike narration with a dramatically high incidence of italicized phrases. In most instances where English-language terms are italicized, Garfinkel's narrator gives the impression that his audience otherwise may miss the point. Thus

members' accounts are "*features* of the socially organized occasions of their use" (p. 4), and "[T]he *recognizedly* rational properties of their (i.e., members') common sense inquiries . . . are *somehow* attainments of members' concerted activities" (p. 7). In such passages, Garfinkel holds a virtual pointer to the page and says to readers, in effect, "Pay close attention or my train of thought will escape you."

The distancing effects of Garfinkel's voice afford him some distinct methodological advantages, and also pose some methodological problems. Theorists, particularly those who are trying to establish an unorthodox program, often find it advantageous to distance themselves from potentially sticky problems. Few circumstances sap the faith and high spirits that nurture fresh insights more completely than the need to respond to queries and criticisms anchored in normal discourse and expressing conventional points of view. So that the uninitiated will see the light, one often must take into methodological account the fact that they feel no professional obligation to be patient or respectful in the face of creativity (which might strike them as theoretical heresy). Moreover, modern intellectual life generates competition (Bourdieu 1990) and a culture of critical discourse (Gouldner 1976) which rewards those who find limitations in ambitious works. Like other scholars, social theorists have access to narrative methods such as disclaimers, qualifications, and preemptory concessions, which preserve their autonomy against conventional skeptics and corrosive critiques. Garfinkel finds his freedom through another device: he insulates himself from readers' objections and doubts by writing in a didactic, impersonal voice pitched to no one in particular.

Overall, then, Garfinkel's voice serves as a methodological shield that forestalls colleagues' doubts and facilitates his own creative work. The intellectual autonomy that eventuates, however, is a mixed blessing. Garfinkel does more than forfeit a spot on the best-seller list by using a voice that distances him from readers; he also cuts himself off from the reflexive relation between voice and subject matter that Goffman (see below) and a few other sociologists of everyday action put to good use. This loss matters in methodological terms. For everyday actors, language serves as the root system of the social stock of knowledge wherein "familiarity, clarity, determinateness, and credibility are in no way identical . . ." and credibility is "in a certain sense . . . the most important dimension" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:146-47, 158-59). Garfinkel understands that everyday accounts are inherently "incomplete" and that their rationality depends on people's expressive idioms. Yet by embedding an italicizing pointer in his text and keeping his precise programmatic objectives continually in view, Garfinkel departs radically from practical, everyday narrative techniques. Although he may proclaim, in principle, that ethnomethodology requires mastery of natural language (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970:345), he himself almost never resorts to natural-language strategies.

Such a stance may be strategic, but Garfinkel also disavows the second-order frames of reference that other theorists develop. Garfinkel's narrator largely insulates himself by referring only rarely to pertinent theories and by almost never adopting a defensive stance. Like Simmel's modern, freedom-hungry urbanite or Durkheim's culturally estranged, egoistic actor, he retreats into a scribal individualism. The autonomy that Garfinkel's narrator gains eventuates in a problem that he shares with other highly individuated actors—namely, how to make his thoughts accessible. Garfinkel's readers may recognize an enormous irony here, for Garfinkel insists that actors create joint contexts in concert with one another (pp. 9-11). Literary critics such as Wayne C. Booth (1988) understand that this ethnomethodological principle also extends to authors, readers, and subjects of sociological analysis.

Two of Garfinkel's prominent idiosyncrasies—his penchant for distancing brackets and



his cascading multiplication of clauses within sentences—render joint context continually problematic. Garfinkel uses quotation marks as brackets more often than he uses italics: “What Is Ethnomethodology?” includes no fewer than 140 expressions set off in this way. Sometimes Garfinkel brackets his own novel formulations, presumably to indicate that his technical sense of the term is in effect—for example, “ethnomethodology” (1967:11, 31) or “anthropologically strange” (p. 9). Sometimes he uses quotation marks to distinguish his usage from conventional academic usages, as in the distinction between “basic” and “applied” research interests (p. 9) or between “necessary” and “sufficient” criteria of rationality (p. 22). Often he employs quotation marks to expropriate and redefine terms from everyday language so that they can serve his own purposes. In these instances he tags customary American middle class phrases with second-order theoretical interpretations. Examples include “let it pass,” “et cetera,” “unless,” and the “uninteresting” reflexivity of accounts (pp. 3, 7–9) as well as a concern about “what to do next” and a grasp of “what anyone knows.”

Garfinkel’s cascading formulations present similar context-building challenges for readers. One of Garfinkel’s fundamental contributions to theories of action is his drawing attention to the ubiquitous practice of producing local contexts in elliptical terms. Members’ locally available methods make consistent, coherent, and artful whatever they do routinely (p. 30) so that they need not spell out all the contingencies framing their accounts. In routine situations, members produce agreement without considering multiple, contingent meanings at all; much the same is true in normal academic discourse. That is, conventional understandings gloss a host of particular contingencies.

Garfinkel’s narrative techniques, however, build up no clear-cut, common context with his readers—neither a conventional commonsense context nor a conventional theoretical context. In that respect he has no obvious means of glossing or deferring the specification of what he means. His narrative distance from his readers necessitates itemizing specific options from the outset. The following cascade is illustrative: “Members know, count on, and make use of this reflexivity to produce, accomplish, recognize, or demonstrate rational-adequacy-for-all-purposes of their procedures and findings” (p. 8). Another cascade follows: “Any setting organizes its activities to make its properties as an organized environment of practical activities detectable, countable, recordable, reportable, tell-a-story-aboutable, analyzable—in short accountable” (p. 13). Neither interlocutors nor authors hardly ever list so many particularities, but then, few of them claim narrative autonomy in an isolated voice.

We do Garfinkel an injustice unless we view his abnormal discourse as a vehicle to his theoretical and sociological success. A sizable body of ethnomethodologists now carry on his work while teaching it to their students; this fact shows that the narrative autonomy Garfinkel established for himself helped to spawn a productive community wherein theoretical consensus, however temporary, might emerge. When Garfinkel traded conventional contextuality for an abnormal discourse capable of ensuring him considerable narrative autonomy, he wagered that others would find their way to the lessons he delivered in a distant, didactic voice. For the most part, his wager played off. What Melvin Pollner (1991:370) calls Garfinkel’s “radical reflexivity” evokes “an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality.” Thereby Garfinkel’s abnormal discourse, which Pollner (1991:376) first brought to light, opened up the theoretical space wherein he could lay the foundations of ethnomethodology. To challenge “orthodox” sociology successfully thus entailed breaking out of its normal discourse. Yet we wonder whether the freedom Garfinkel required necessitated the particular narrative methods he employed. The voice Goffman uses to establish his theoretical bearings in *Frame Analysis* suggests that alternatives exist, but not without some costs of their own.

*Goffman's Narrative Voice*

On p. 16 of Goffman's text the narrator announces, "That is the introduction." Yet more than three pages of "Introduction" remain—pages of highly reflexive observations about framing one's work. There "Goffman makes the work of a preface a worry about its potentially regressive nature. . . . Because he mistrusts the place of reflexive thought, he resorts to the conventions of ordinary language for a release from the corrosion of self-doubt and the reader's mistrust. . . ." (O'Neill 1981:360). Overall Goffman's introduction involves "doing" the topic of inquiry, a strategy facilitated by his concern with how we make sense of our experiences. Such a narrator belongs to an academic minority; normal academic discourse comprises impersonal texts unfolded by narrators who need not be taken into conscious account. Garfinkel fulfills these expectations to a disconcerting extent; Goffman sets them aside to a similarly disconcerting degree. Throughout his introduction he uses a personal voice to tell how he sees himself as an author, how he regards his subject matter, and how he wants readers to view him and his work.

Goffman's narrator plays with divisions between "us" and "them" without ever fixing a demarcation. At times he distances himself and his readers from the subjects of his remarks, as when he observes, "[O]rdinarily, all *they* do is assess correctly what the situation ought to be for *them* and then act accordingly" (1974:1-2; our emphasis). Immediately, however, he follows by aggregating himself, his readers, and his subjects with "True, *we* personally negotiate aspects of all arrangements under which *we* live. . . ." (p. 2; our emphasis), and completes the paragraph with first-person plural usages. This voice dances between detachment and familiarity, rejecting the rigidity of the conventional narrative roles associated with normal academic discourse. Goffman's inclusive pronouns subvert normal academic discourse, but his distancing pronouns distinguish readers and the narrator from commonsense subjects in ways that subvert the "Will Rogers" line.

Sometimes Goffman's narrator sidesteps normal academic discourse by using streetwise idioms and colloquial techniques that invite readers to see through scholarly pretensions to the everyday strategies they presuppose. He entertains the notion of "try[ing] to get dodgy" with prefaces (p. 19); he accuses William James of having "copped out" (p. 3); he declares that the term *real* has been "Wittgensteined into a blur of slightly different uses" (p. 13). Here Goffman's linguistic populism adds democratic spice to academic prose with mock egalitarianism capable of cutting highfalutin scholarship down to size. The flippant mocking of intellectual shibboleths discernible in such remarks gives credence to interpreters such as Randall Collins (1988), who detect an elitist self-image lurking in Goffman's prose.

Even though Goffman's narrator is occasionally disdainful, for us his elitism is neither cut nor dried. Unlike masters of mockery such as H.L. Menken or Gore Vidal, Goffman's narrator limits his cutting remarks to academic matters. When he gets down to sociological business, his prose bespeaks the hard work of doing justice to the mercurial nature of everyday life. Where a self-certain narrator might create a lexicon of precisely worded second-order concepts at the outset of her work, Goffman's narrator admits to "crude" formulations and a disposition toward "evocative definitions" (p. 10). As "any raw batch of occurrences" offering "a starting point for analysis," for instance, a *strip* is "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity . . . as seen from the perspective of those subjectively involved in sustaining an interest in them" (p. 10). What does "raw" mean here? "Slice"? "Occurrence"? "Perspective"? Unlike Garfinkel, Goffman lets his ambiguities stand. He refuses to treat ordinary language as a "treasure house of ready made preconstituted types and characteristics" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973:14) amenable to scientific elaboration. Seemingly he prefers credibility to clarity or determinateness, to

reintroduce Schutz and Luckmann's useful distinction (1973:146-47, 158-59). Goffman's indeterminate usages suggest that ordinary forms of life may not be graspable in clear-cut terms. Seen somewhat differently, his work puts "a premium on discovery" and on "the creation of categories that *might* be filled at some future point" (Williams 1988:77, 81).

Goffman's casual way of introducing concepts also sets a personal tone. His concepts lack sufficient theoretical force to justify a didactic voice. Instead, as in his remarks on the pivotal idea of "frame," Goffman lets his readers observe him reflecting on his work. His initial definition sounds formal enough: frame refers to "principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (1974:10). Immediately, however, Goffman transposes the definition into a personal key: "Frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I can identify." He adds, "That is my definition of frame" (p. 11), leaving readers to understand that someone else may see things differently.

This shifting, personal voice often contrasts with that of imperturbable, didactic narrators. A typical scientific narrator hides his vulnerabilities behind an impersonal shield of didactic prose, but Goffman seems to forfeit the autonomy that such narrators (including Garfinkel's) establish by insulating themselves narratively. Actually, Goffman has his own means of establishing creative freedom. Paradoxically, he seals his freedom in the "Introduction" only after presenting a self that is closer to his academic kin than implied by his casual way with pronouns, colloquialisms, and definitions.

This formidable side of Goffman's narrator surfaces in his opening paragraph:

There is a venerable tradition in philosophy that suggests that what the reader assumes to be real is but a shadow, and that by attending to what the writer says about perception, thought, the brain, language, culture, a new methodology, or novel social forces the veil can be lifted. That sort of line, of course, gives as much a role to the writer and his writings as possible and for that reason is pathetic. (What can better push a book than the claim that it will change what the reader thinks is going on?) (1974:1).

Although he takes issue with an intellectual tradition in his first sentence, Goffman writes with no evident investment in his own remarks. In the next sentence, he characterizes the tradition as "pathetic," and our sense shifts. A narrator who can spot a con artist's trick in a philosophical tradition, peel it away, and brand it pathetic with a few well-chosen words commands respect for talent and guts simultaneously. Goffman transforms severity into brutal sarcasm in the subsequent parenthetical sentence, which reduces the epistemological elitism of conventional academic authors to a craven desire for literary success. The next two sentences are equally formidable. After citing W.I. Thomas's dictum "If men define things as real, they are real in their consequences," Goffman decries gratuitous invocations of that assertion by underscoring its modest significance:

This statement is true as it stands but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress; in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene for those who tried to define the situation wrongly (p. 1).

With his sharp, critical edge, this narrator next holds forth with an extended passage too relevant to be superfluous and too learned to be ignored. The passage (pp. 2-7) first cites William James, Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, Aron Gurwitsch, and Edmund Husserl. It next links Luigi Pirandello and the theater of the absurd to a paper by Gregory Bateson, and then offers staccato citations of Ludwig Wittgenstein,

John Austin, and Austin's student D.S. Schwayder. A footnote in a later passage places a recondite cherry atop this erudite cake: Goffman (p. 11, n. 21) casually offers an aside in untranslated German, apparently presuming that readers will follow him down his obscure byway alluding to Wittgenstein's enigmatic aphorism at the end of *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

We can justifiably ask this narrator the pivotal question posed by Goffman in *Frame Analysis*: What is it that's going on here? Why does Goffman's narrator, who seems to be so at home with "us" in some passages, distinguish himself from "them" whenever refined erudition serves his purposes? Does the speaker who confesses his conceptual sins have a right to adopt an unforgiving standard when sifting insight from dross in others' conceptualizations? Might these shifts be strategic?

Again consider Goffman's vulnerability. By fashioning a personal narrator, Goffman presents himself to readers as a colleague rather than a lecturer. Readers expect narrators such as Goffman's to anticipate our hesitations and assuage our doubts. Many readers come prepared to overlook weak arguments in support of creative insights, but few will tolerate personal narrators who disdain justifying their ideas to readers.

Against these expectations Goffman must balance his need for intellectual autonomy. Justifications and explanations may keep him in good faith with his readers, but they can induce him to strike a defensive note when he may want readers to accept his convictions without question. Goffman's way of establishing his autonomy differs from Garfinkel's but is a variant of a strategy often used by formal narrators. As illustrated in Durkheim's *Suicide*, Weber's methodological writings, and Merton's essay on theories of the middle range, prominent theorists often clear some ground for themselves by staging a mock debate with opponents; thereby they defuse objections and free their voices. With his personal voice, Goffman plays a variation on that theme. After his critical skirmishes with William James and W.I. Thomas early in the "Introduction," Goffman withdraws into self-referential narration: the self-assured scholar who makes stern, informed judgments of Thomas's and James's time-honored ideas renders similar judgments about his own insights. Goffman's liberating strategy includes another surprise as well: unlike the narrators of most theorists who conduct mock confrontations, Goffman's narrative self lodges justified complaints against the project dear to his sociological heart. Goffman, in brief, masterminds a critical debate between two halves of the same narrator.

Goffman plays out this self-critical/self-assertive dialectic primarily between pages 8 and 16. There he executes a series of encounters comprising two moves: one move expresses his misgivings about some aspect of his work, and the other insists on his right to pursue his own line. The first oppositional couplet begins with the pivotal question "What is it that's going on here?"

Let me say at once that the question . . . is considerably suspect. Any event can be described in terms that include a wide swath or a narrow one and—as a related but not identical matter—in terms of a focus that is close-up or distant. And no one has a theory as to what particular span or level will come to be the ones employed. To begin, I must be allowed to proceed by picking my span and level arbitrarily without special justification (1974:8).

Note the juxtaposition of concession and assertion. Goffman manages to preserve his theoretical autonomy by a give-and-take maneuver. First he accepts objections that he knows critical readers may raise; then he claims the right to proceed as he prefers.

Similar narrative forms shape other sequences. After criticizing retrospective represen-

tations (pp. 9–10) in self-assured tones, Goffman denies the ultimate significance of the problems that his critical side puts in his way and closes with a playful turn:

I only want to claim that although these problems are very important, they are not the only ones, and that their treatment is not necessarily required before one can proceed. So here too I will let sleeping sentences lie (p. 10).

Passages exhibiting variants of such paired moves continue for five more pages, but one sequence epitomizes this narrator's contrasting self-presentations:

There are lots of good grounds for doubting the kind of analysis about to be presented. I would do so myself if it weren't my own. It is too bookish, too general, too removed from fieldwork to have a good chance of being anything more than another mentalistic adumbration. And, as will be noted throughout, there are certainly things that cannot be nicely dealt with in the arguments that follow. . . . Nonetheless, some of the things in this world seem to urge the analysis I am attempting, and the compulsion is strong to try to outline the framework that will perform his job (p. 13).

Goffman's bid for narrative autonomy takes an unusual form here. Instead of expressing an overpowering surge of self-assertion against criticism and doubt, Goffman's narrator portrays himself as swept along by "some of the things in this world." He feels a "compulsion" to proceed. Goffman seeks a license to go his own way. Instead of claiming an arbitrary right to proceed as he likes, however, he figuratively forfeits his autonomy to a vision greater than his all-too-human narrative self. Goffman's more ambitious narrative moments draw on his confidence about his feel for everyday idioms and social stocks of knowledge, from his sense of subjects as "us" rather than "them." Similarly, his imagery of being "urged" and "compelled" is that of a visionary hearing voices in the hubbub of mundane interaction, not from the heavens.

Goffman's dialectics of self-liberation thus pit his trust in his singularly sociological sensitivities against well-founded sociological objections standing in his way. Using a censorious voice, Goffman seems to portray himself as a self-deprecating scholar, but his modesty may be disingenuous. Randall Collins (1988:2), for example, sees it as "a weapon of attack, and [Goffman's] overall stance [as] an aggressive, even haughty one." Collins makes a valid point about Goffman the biographically situated author (also see Marx 1984). That Goffman's narrator at times is an elitist or a bully does not mean, however, that his recurrent, inconsistent modesty is entirely a narrative ruse. To conclude otherwise would entail denying the intellectual merits of the objections he raises to his own work. Yet evidence from a self-reflexive passage of the "Introduction" suggests that Goffman took his audience's criticisms seriously even while he asserted his right to go his own way:

That is the introduction. Writing one allows a writer to try to set the terms of what he will write about. Accounts, excuses, apologies designed to reframe what follows after them, designed to draw a line between deficiencies in what the author writes and deficiencies in himself, leaving him, he hopes, a little better defended than he might otherwise be (p. 16).

Readers familiar with Goffman's corpus recognize his narrative demeanor as a "remedial" procedure aimed at "transforming what could be seen as offensive into what can be seen as acceptable" (Goffman 1971:109). Presumably Goffman knew that following his own

intuitions was potentially offensive, especially to readers primed to reject analyses that challenge analytical conventions. Yet whatever we make of his elitism, we can regard Goffman's narrative alternations between critical and constructive voices as a struggle for autonomy. Robin Williams (1988:84) offers a resonant viewpoint: "The normally de-authored speech of the disembodied social scientist is constantly toyed with in Goffman's work, although for serious reasons."

We share Williams' (1988:73) sense that Goffman "is successful not *despite* these vulnerabilities, but rather *because* of them." Goffman's credibility is ratified by readers whose admiration continues unabated a decade after his death. Yet his disengagement from normal discourse among theorists disadvantages him in at least one crucial methodological sense. The closing passage of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, left untranslated for the cognoscenti, provides a clue. In translation the passage reads: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein [1921]1961:151). By relying heavily on his discursively constituted credibility, Goffman's narrator must take this motto to heart.<sup>3</sup> What he cannot say with any confidence, he must not say at all.

Goffman, like Garfinkel, pays a price for his narrative freedom. Rather than distancing himself too far from everyday life, as Garfinkel does, Goffman stays too close to those parts of it which he feels comfortable discussing. The urge for theoretical closure that we sense in Garfinkel's expository cascades never surfaces in Goffman's "Introduction." In view of Goffman's resolutely personal line, it comes as no surprise that he never launched a theoretical program or propounded a radically new conception of social interaction. Readers unacquainted with sociology can learn much from Goffman if they bear with his painstaking disclosures of everyday complexities, but social theorists struggle awkwardly to wrest insights of extensive analytical value from the intensive examination of interaction amidst his "remedial" dialectics (see Burns 1992; Collins 1988; Giddens 1987; Phillip Manning 1992; Rawls 1985).

#### A METHODOLOGICAL DIALECTIC IN NARRATIVE VOICE

Richard Rorty's distinction between normal and abnormal discourse offers preliminary access to voice as theoretical method. Samples of narration by two of the most original narrative voices in contemporary sociological theory show that this distinction needs expanding to take account of methodological complexities that enter the production of theoretical texts. Becker's us/them distinction offers a starting point for such expansion: our readings of Garfinkel and Goffman suggest that an author's emphasis or deemphasis on the distance between us and them influences the credibility and the overall reception of his or her text. In addition, we find a second us/them device that concerns including or excluding conventional academic readers and therefore pertains to underplaying or asserting one's autonomy. Here an author's choice may lay grounds for originality. In normal academic discourse, one addresses knowledgeable scholars as equals by taking their interests into account. Creative theorists such as Garfinkel and Goffman, however, narratively free themselves to pursue interests of their own, thereby demoting skeptical colleagues from "us" to "them." Garfinkel licenses himself by depersonalizing his prose and ignoring ideas that challenge his own; Goffman, by personalizing his narrator and then requesting indulgence of his forceful vision.

Though most readers find Goffman the more engaging narrator, he may handicap himself

<sup>3</sup> We understand this motto in the sense in which Goffman introduces it in his text—that is, abstracted from its implications in its original context in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*.

by seizing more freedom than he needs. Overall his stance presupposes an intellectual blank check, a license for self-indulgence. Goffman's digressive expositions of favored themes, his return to these themes using different metaphors (see Burns 1992), and his inability to draw together his theoretical vision (see Phillip Manning 1992) suggest a narrator who has failed to discipline himself sufficiently. Whether or not Goffman believed he was under the spell of "some things in this world," he clearly followed his sociological muse wherever it led.

Goffman's narrative self-indulgence may be one reason why he failed to found an ongoing theoretical tradition or community. Garfinkel has had more success in this regard. The narrative means whereby Garfinkel avoids criticism may account in part for his widespread influence: his didactic demeanor and stylistic quirks act as a filtering device, estranging many readers but enticing others to join him by distancing themselves from conventional objections. Establishing an ethnomethodological community would have been more difficult if Garfinkel, like Goffman, had asserted his personal autonomy while asking readers to pardon the intellectual weaknesses in his work.

Turning from originality to credibility, we find that both Garfinkel and Goffman often advance their most original insights into everyday life by describing the production of locally meaningful encounters or events. Granted, neither scholar claims that his evidence provides "objective" support for his ideas. Each makes too much of the accountability or framing of social events to imply that facts have any voice of their own. Also, their credibility would suffer if they deleted systematic empirical research (Garfinkel) or compilations of field notes and anecdotes (Goffman). Yet their credibility depends heavily on what they make of their findings and thus, at least in part, on their narrative voices.

If empirical evidence alone determined credibility, Garfinkel would seem the more credible of the two. He gathers his evidence more systematically than Goffman, who devotes a passage (1974:14-15) to apologizing for the apparent disorganization of his observations. Nonetheless, our reading of their respective narrative demeanors leaves Goffman's credibility looming larger than Garfinkel's. Despite his elitist ways with academic themes, Goffman's clever way with idiomatic quips, his inclusionary pronouns, and his undisguised acknowledgment of his personal slant invite trust in his good judgment. We never may have noticed what he perceives, and even may doubt our ability to produce similar perceptions. Nonetheless Goffman's familiarizing devices render him a fellow participant, not an observer from afar. Anthony Giddens (1984:334-43) suggests that in gaining access to social actors' subject matter, social scientists are required to respect social actors' practices and beliefs. This respect turns upon "credibility criteria," including actors' discursive style. Goffman's narrator meets such criteria by adopting a style that other (particularly clever) members of our (middle-class American) culture might deploy.

At the outset we announced our primary concern with voice as a theoretical method. Despite their discernible differences, Garfinkel's and Goffman's texts imply that the creative, pathbreaking voice is likely to constitute one or another variety of abnormal discourse. Such discourse largely presupposes an autonomous voice, whereas establishing one's credibility depends largely on a familiar voice that is achieved most easily by using normal discourse. Is there a way to balance credibility with originality? In our view, the two constitute a methodological dialectic underlying differences among theorists' voices. As inquiries proceed, that dialectic may emerge as the key to the constitution of both normal and abnormal discourse among social theorists. Put differently, when social theorists shape their voices, they fashion a discourse somewhere on the normal/abnormal continuum, where credibility weighs heavily at one pole and originality at the other. Garfinkel's and Goffman's texts illustrate the methodological density undergirding that continuum and those outcomes.

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Cover illustration: *Adrasteia's Gift to the Child*  
(With reference to the Israel/P.L.O. peace treaty signing ceremony.)  
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