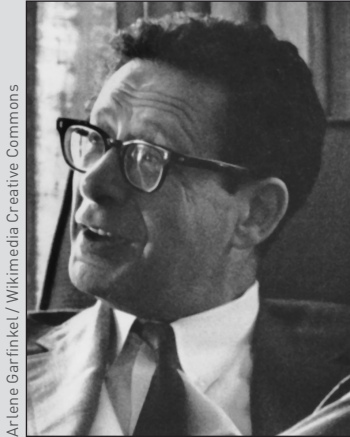


## HAROLD GARFINKEL

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH\*



Arlene Garfinkel / Wikimedia Creative Commons

Like many who came of age during the Depression and later World War II, Harold Garfinkel took a convoluted path into sociology. Garfinkel was born in Newark, New Jersey, on October 29, 1917, and died on April 21, 2011 (Maynard, 2011). His father was a small businessman who sold household goods on the installment plan to immigrant families. While his father was eager for him to learn a trade, Harold wanted to go to college. He did go into his father's business but also began taking business courses at the then-unaccredited University of Newark. Because the courses tended to be taught by graduate students from Columbia, they were both high in quality and, because the students lacked practical experience, highly theoretical. His later theoretical orientation and his specific orientation to "accounts" are traceable, at least in part, to these courses in general,

and particularly to an accounting course on the "theory of accounts." "'How do you make the columns and figures accountable [to superiors]?' was the big question according to Garfinkel" (Rawls, 2011:104). Also of importance was the fact that Garfinkel encountered other Jewish students at Newark who were taking courses in sociology and were later to become social scientists.

Graduating in 1939, Garfinkel spent a summer in a Quaker work camp in rural Georgia. There he learned that the University of North Carolina had a sociology program that was also oriented to the furtherance of public works projects like the one in which he was involved. Admitted to the program with a fellowship, Garfinkel chose Guy Johnson as his thesis adviser, and Johnson's interest in race relations led Garfinkel to do his master's thesis on interracial homicide. He also was exposed to a wide range of social theory, most notably the works of phenomenologists and the recently published (in 1937) *The Structure of Social Action*, by Talcott Parsons. Although the vast majority of graduate students at North Carolina at that time were drawn toward statistics and "scientific sociology," Garfinkel was attracted to theory, especially Florian Znaniecki's now almost forgotten work on social action and the importance of the actor's point of view. These interests were evidenced also by Garfinkel's work during wartime. He was drafted into the Air Force in 1942.

[Garfinkel] was given the task of training troops in tank warfare on a golf course on Miami Beach in the complete absence of tanks. Garfinkel had only pictures of tanks from *Life* magazine. The real tanks were all in combat. The man who would insist on concrete empirical detail *in lieu* of theorized accounts was teaching real troops who were about to enter live combat to fight against only imagined tanks in situations where things like the proximity of the troops to the imagined tank could make the difference between life and death. The impact of this on the development of his views can only be imagined. He had to train troops to throw explosives into the tracks of imaginary tanks; to keep imaginary tanks from seeing them by directing fire at imaginary tank ports. This task posed in a new and very concrete way the problems of the adequate

*(Continued)*