

A Memory of Egon Bittner

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Although I had not seen Egon Bittner for many years I was saddened to hear of his death, the news of which revived memories of my graduate student days at Berkeley. In 1960 I enrolled as a doctoral student in the Department of Sociology despite never having previously taken a single sociology course. I don't recall on what basis I chose my first courses at Berkeley, but it proved to be life-changing that I enrolled in a seminar given by Erving Goffman. Goffman presented a perspective on social interaction that was quite outside the discipline's reigning concern with social change (for the most part studied using quantitative methods) in lectures that were elegant presentations of original work, work that immediately offered me a home in the discipline. At the same time I encountered several of Goffman's students who were, or were about to become, attached to Harold Garfinkel's newly founded ethnomethodology. This led me away from Goffman's work though I continued to be his student (as did the other adherents to EM, as it came to be known).

Chief among these students was Harvey Sacks, who possessed a law degree from Yale and had met Garfinkel at Harvard where he was on sabbatical. Others were David Sudnow, Emanuel Schegloff and Mel Pollner. Sacks brought Harold Garfinkel to talk to the Graduate Sociology Club. Not long after, Egon, at that time a research scientist at the Langley Porter Psychiatric Institute in San Francisco, also addressed the club. This was my introduction to the man and his work.

My acquaintance with Egon was thus through the ethnomethodology group, but Egon himself is best thought of as a friend of ethnomethodology rather than a disciple of Garfinkel. He had taken his Ph.D. at UCLA where, as Sherri Cavan (another Goffman student) tells me, he had served as Garfinkel's teaching assistant, and was very well acquainted with the work. At this time Egon was publishing in mainstream journals, which were mostly closed to ethnomethodologists – indeed the *American Sociological Review* in 1968 asked James S. Coleman, noted for his work in mathematical sociology, to review Garfinkel's path-breaking book, with predictable results. Nevertheless, the ASR had published Egon's 'Radicalism and Organization of Radical Movements' in 1963, while 'The Concept of Organization' appeared in *Social Research* in 1965 and 'Police Discretion in Emergency

Apprehension of Mentally Ill Persons' in *Social Problems* in 1967. In these early publications it is clear to the discerning reader that Egon had deeply absorbed the work of both Garfinkel and Alfred Schütz, though they are rarely explicitly cited. 'The Concept of Organization', with its declaration that 'The point at which the use of common-sense concepts becomes a transgression is where such concepts are expected to do the analytical work of theoretical concepts', struck me as possessing both power and clarity, and I included it in the Penguin reader, *Ethnomethodology*, which I edited in 1974.

The Berkeley group, all relatively young, exhibited an attractive and lively engagement with Garfinkel's work, towards which they adopted a proselytising attitude. David Sudnow, in particular, could be quite abrasive, a tone which Egon – about thirty-nine at this time – carefully avoided. It was a pleasure to hear the measured and thoughtful way in which Egon spoke. He possessed a seriousness – perhaps gravity would be a better word – which I found very appealing.

At the same time his written work avoided common stylistic tics in ethnomethodologist's writings, and rarely used a vocabulary that indexed one's allegiance to Garfinkel. Most importantly, in my opinion, his work avoids the rather common failing of constantly restating ethnomethodology's programme.

I got to know Egon better outside of the group, and at about the time I was preparing to write a dissertation under Goffman's supervision he offered me a position as a research assistant, which would have at the same time given me material for a dissertation. I consulted Goffman, who was not enthusiastic about the idea, and I declined Egon's invitation. I have come to think that was probably a mistake. In our conversations I enjoyed what I thought of as his European style, and I greatly admired the depth of his reading of the social. That admiration remained with me over the years, and I regret not having seen Egon again after we had both left California. He was an unforgettable presence, both as a man and as a thinker.