



IN MEMORIAM

Melvin Pollner
Professor of Sociology
UC Los Angeles
1940 – 2007

Mel Pollner died at the UCLA Medical Center on November 2, 2007. He had been diagnosed with lung cancer in April, and maintained an upbeat, uplifting outlook despite little progress with several sequences of treatment. His family, friends and colleagues sorely miss his lively intelligence, warmth, humanity, and humor. The UCLA Department of Sociology, where he taught for almost 40 years, is diminished by the loss of an invaluable colleague and teacher and a leading practitioner of ethnomethodology, one of its signature specialties.

Mel was a sociologist who really liked people. He went out of his way to meet newcomers, to chat with friends and colleagues, to find out about their lives, to commiserate with their troubles, and to recognize their skills and accomplishments. He made these occasions memorable through his interest, warmth and humor. Being with Mel was a joy; he lit up casual contacts, hallway encounters, family and social gatherings, seminars and colloquia, and even faculty meetings.

Mel's sense of humor is reflected in his sociological work. Just as his humor took off from surface and literal understandings to identify and play with alternative meanings, his sociology drew upon a sensitivity to alternate interpretations and possibilities and a push to imagine "how one could reason otherwise." A committed ethnomethodologist throughout his career, Mel worked to identify and analyze the taken-for-granted assumptions and practices that people use to create and sustain the sense of being in the same "real world" and hence to produce meaningful and coherent social life – dizzying inquiries that he pursued to profound levels with a light empirical touch.

Mel was a pivotal, integrative figure among ethnomethodologists, having studied with and been mentored by Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel. He developed strong ties across all tendencies and variants of the early generation of those inspired by them. After graduating from the City University of New York in 1962, Mel was headed to the graduate sociology program at the University of Wisconsin when he read Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and changed course to Berkeley. Like many of those studying with Goffman at this time, Mel became interested in the work of Garfinkel, and while using the computers at the UCLA Medical Center in the summer of 1964 began to consult with Garfinkel. He completed his MA at Berkeley in 1966 and then transferred to UC Santa Barbara to complete his graduate studies under the direction of Cicourel. He joined the UCLA faculty in 1968.

Within ethnomethodology, Mel's major contribution lay in analyzing how people create and sustain a sense of living in one objective and intersubjectively shared world -- in short, how people "do" ordinary reality. Just as Evans-Pritchard had analyzed Azande witchcraft as an internally coherent and impermeable system of beliefs and practices, so Mel treated Western notions of reality as "a cultural system which patterns the actions and utterances of members and is drawn upon by them as a way of ordering their projects and circumstances." In a series of influential articles and in his book, *Mundane Reason* (1987), he examined the ways in which this reality – the ordinarily unquestioned conviction of "an 'out there,' 'public' or 'objective' world" – is produced and sustained in ordinary interaction.

This work on mundane reasoning is remarkable on several counts. First, Mel turned these issues from airy philosophical speculations to grounded empirical studies, examining the actual uses of mundane reason in an ordinary setting, a municipal traffic court. Traffic court provided instance after instance of conflicting claims or accounts about what had “really happened.” Second, he shifted the center of gravity for thinking about the constructed nature of reality from marginal comments on the deviant and peripheral to the recurrent everyday interactions of ordinary people and institutional actors. Prior scholarship had treated as pathological or curiosities those who did not consistently recognize one objective real world shared in common – out-of-contact others like schizophrenics, developmental others like Piaget’s infants who had not yet learned object-constancy, culturally alien others like the Azande or the Yaqui. In contrast, Mel showed how the very same problems in recognizing and sustaining a sense of an objective reality routinely arose and were handled in ordinary, everyday exchanges in traffic court through the processes of mundane reasoning.

Mel argued that mundane reason’s assumption of the objectivity of the world generated everyday puzzles or anomalies on the order of “how come he saw it and you did not?” If there is one real world available to all, how can two people see or experience it differently? But mundane reason also provided ways of resolving these nascent reality disjunctions while preserving the notion of one common real world; notably, by “discrediting one version as the product of a faulted or inadequate method of observing the world” (e.g., hallucination, paranoia, bias, blindness, deafness, false consciousness). In an article published with Lynn Wikler in 1985, Mel provided a detailed case study of these processes of reality construction by analyzing how a family produced and sustained a version of their five year old daughter as of normal intelligence and verbal competence against clinical diagnoses of profound retardation.

A number of Mel’s other ethnomethodological writings were widely known. With Don Zimmerman, he published an early programmatic statement of the ethnomethodological approach, “The Everyday World as a Phenomenon,” criticizing existing sociological research for using as “resources” commonsense concepts and assumptions that should rather be treated as “topics” for sociological analysis. His article on constitutive and mundane versions of labeling theory provided a fundamental critique of an important sociological conception of deviance. His 1978 chapter on “explicative transactions” provides his most detailed analysis of the routine operation of traffic court, focusing on defendants’ use of earlier cases to plan their own best defense and judges’ reflexive use of this practice for their own organizational purposes. And finally, in his 1991 ASR article “Left of Ethnomethodology,” Mel lamented the turn away from radical reflexivity (the appreciation of all sociological and ethnomethodological analyses as themselves socially accomplished), and offered this appreciation of the importance of such reflexivity for ethnomethodology and sociology generally: “Left to its own dynamic, radical reflexivity would unsettle ceaselessly. When deployed as an analytic tool, however, it provides a purchase on deep and novel levels of practice. Though it is pointless, groundless, and subversive, radical reflexivity delivers to epistemologically settled communities the work through which points are made, grounds established, and versions of reality secured against subversions.”

Mel was also a sociologist of unusual breadth. He had strong training in survey research at Berkeley, and co-authored quantitative articles published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* and *Sociological Inquiry*, as well as a version of his MA dissertation on prayer in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*. I worked with him on a series of ethnographic studies of psychiatric emergency teams and the dynamics of researcher/ researched relationships. He also published articles on humor and narrative practices in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and the social construction of stock market bubbles.

Mel’s writings, particularly his work on mundane reason and radical reflexivity, have continuing currency among ethnomethodologists, and have influenced a broad swath of late-20th century social thought. His work is widely cited by social theorists and researchers in science studies, social problems, and the sociology of medicine and mental illness.

Throughout his career Mel was an inspiring and devoted teacher. In earlier years he taught large undergraduate lecture courses introducing students to ethnomethodological ideas and studies full bore. In later years he focused specifically on the sociology of mental illness, selectively working in ethnomethodological and constructivist insights. He was a demanding yet supportive graduate instructor, continuing to work with students beyond their dissertations, in particular co-publishing articles with David Goode, Dana Rosenfeld and Jill Stein.

Mel devoted much of his time and energy to his family. He celebrated his 44th wedding anniversary with Judy in June 2007, an extremely close and mutually supportive as well as long-lasting marriage. He was

extremely proud of his children, Leslie and Adrian, both of their character and outlook on life, and of their achievements in the worlds of public policy and lawyering respectively.

To honor his intellectual and research commitments, the Melvin Pollner Prize in Ethnomethodology will be created in the Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis Section of the ASA.

Robert M. Emerson