Reading and Writing Across (Epistemological) Boundaries

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http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3ei
“Social issues come in complex forms rather than in presliced disciplinary fragments” — Wertsch, del Rio and Alvarez

In “On Some Limits of Interdisciplinarity,” Andrew Carlin describes his purpose as examining “the use of published research, derived from sociology and ethnomethodology, in disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies.” More specifically, he focuses on “missing ‘disciplinary’ epistemologies” especially those “discipline-specific epistemologies or ways of knowing that are shown to be internally inconsistent.”

Carlin raises important concerns about reading and writing across boundaries reflecting differing epistemologies. He notes “The reception and interpretation of an author’s arguments can be influenced by the reviewer’s own standpoint, and through misunderstandings of the standpoint from the authors under review.” This includes (mis)understandings of “how discipline or field-specific terms are put to use” and the “internal logic of research approaches ... that ... address phenomena in different ways.”

I agree with Carlin that such differences can lead to consequential misunderstandings; I also agree that they provide learning opportunities for readers and writers on different sides of epistemological boundaries. The question is how to read and write in a way that takes those concerns into account without losing the benefits of differing epistemological perspectives in addressing complex social problems. Carlin’s answers seem to focus on the citing authors’ knowledge of the corpora from which an article comes—both the disciplinary corpus and the corpus of the cited author’s work: “In this paper I present an example of the selective treatment of a single corpus-item, which has been divorced from the corpus (Sudnow’s work and ethnomethodological studies), in terms of a single study policy, viz. ‘ethnomethodological indifference.’” Here is where we begin to disagree. How much one should know about a body of literature from which a cited articles comes—about the cited author’s oeuvre or about the discipline in which it is located—depends in substantial part on the purpose of the citation and the purpose of the article in which it is located.

Carlin writes in very general terms about the purpose or “use of ‘literature’ in research

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1 I am grateful to James Hammond for our discussions about the issues reflected here and for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this text.
3 Carlin 2016, 1.
4 Carlin 2016, 2.
5 Like Library and Information Sciences on which Carlin draws, my scholarship is also located in a field—Education—that also draws on scholarship from multiple disciplines in addressing educational problems and my own work has often sought to take advantage of the learning opportunities that come from working across the boundaries of research discourses (within and across disciplines), especially, those that reflect different epistemological as well as ontological understandings both to build multi-dimensional programs of research and to illuminate taken for granted perspectives and practices of different research discourses for critical reflection. See Moss and Haertel, 2016.
6 Carlin 2016, 3.
7 Carlin 2016, 1.
8 Carlin 2016, 4.
projects.”
And yet, there are many purposes for using the literature within research projects. The appropriateness of the use needs to be evaluated in light of the citing authors’ purposes, both for the particular citation and for the overall purpose of the article in which it is embedded. Within the body of Carlin’s article one can see many different ways in which citations are used, including, for instance, the single brief citation of Abbott (2001) in support of the statement that interdisciplinarity is not new, more extensive citations/quotations from Garfinkel and Sacks among others, in characterizing ethnomethodological indifference, and extended critique of two articles to illustrate the focal problem of failing to acknowledge disciplinary epistemologies (citations in Carlin 2016).

In this response, I scale back the scope from questions about (conflicting) disciplinary epistemologies to questions about the use of particular articles for particular purposes when epistemological differences between citing and cited authors are entailed. My initial questions are about what might constitute a fair representation of a cited article for a given purpose; such representations, I’ll argue, constitute building blocks for using the literature, so it seems like an appropriate place to begin. Given short space and time, the focus of my response will be Carlin’s extended use of Timmermans as an illustration of citational “troubles,” which will entail some focus on Timmermans’ extended use of Sudnow for a different purpose. That will allow me to highlight and illustrate a number of potential principles for fair representations (at least for purposes involving extended representations of single articles like those) and point to some broader questions Carlin’s article raises for me about reading and writing across epistemological boundaries.

While I think there are justifiable concerns to be raised about under-acknowledged epistemological differences in Timmermans’ use of Sudnow, I have questions about the fairness of Carlin’s representation of Timmermans and suggestions for how the representation might have been fairer. Implicit in my analysis of these texts will be the following principles (inspired, in part, by Gadamer’s “hermeneutical attitude” as discussed more fully in Moss).

- The cited authors’ stated purposes are clear.
- Quotations and other representations of parts of the cited text are interpreted in light of the whole text.
- Criticisms are grounded in sufficient representations of the cited text for readers to understand and evaluate the criticism for themselves.

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9 Carlin 2016, 1.
10 Carlin 2016, 3.
11 Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks 1970.
13 When I am simply acknowledging a citation to which Carlin (2016), Timmermans (1998) or Sudnow (1967) refer, and where my comment does not draw independently on the cited text, I do not include the embedded citations in my reference list. Interested readers may consult the references provided by the citing authors.
14 Timmermans 1998.
15 David Sudnow 1967.
17 Pamela A. Moss 2005.
Citing authors illuminate the ways in which the cited text challenges their preconceptions and/or the practices through which they sought such challenges.

I invite readers to consider these principles as they read on (and to use them to critique my own use of the articles by Carlin, Timmermans, and Sudnow).

**Illustrating My Principles for Fair Representations**

Carlin introduces us to Timmermans’ “Social Death as Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: David Sudnow’s *Passing on* Revisited”19 as a “case that uses an ethnomethodological ethnography20 as a foil to upgrade a research project.”21 Readers are told that Timmermans’ article “displays the policy-oriented commitments of the writer and his misunderstanding (or misrepresentations) of the ethnomethodological programme.”22 That is followed by a block quote taken from the conclusion of Timmermans’ article which is used to support Carlin’s critical commentary.

My first question, which I can’t find addressed in Carlin’s representation, concerns what Timmermans’ purpose is, in general, and in his use of Sudnow. Here is what I found in Timmermans’ article:

The objective of this article is to evaluate the extent to which Sudnow’s earlier claims about social inequality are still relevant in a transformed health care context that promotes a rational approach to medical practice and is influenced by extensive legal protections.23

The weight of Carlin’s critique focuses on Timmerman’s misunderstanding of the ethnomethodological program reflected in Sudnow:

Timmermans regards *Passing On* as a classic item on the reading list in the “sociology of death”, rather than an ethnomethodologically informed study which has no interest in being assigned to a discrete or substantive area of sociology.24

But that caused me to go back and read key parts of Sudnow to see how he framed his purposes and situated his study within his discipline: “My central concern has been to describe the work conditions of the hospital environment and the place of ‘dying’ and ‘death’

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18 With apologies, the illustrations below take readers through some potentially tedious detail that I consider necessary to warrant my critique of Carlin’s critique of Timmermans. For those not interested in this level of detail, the section can be skimmed or treated as an appendix illustrating the principles.
19 Timmermans 1998.
20 Sudnow 1967.
21 Carlin 2016, 2.
22 Carlin 2016, 4.
23 Timmermans 1998, 453.
24 Carlin 2016, 5; italics mine.
Within that occupational setting.” While this statement is taken from the conclusion (and chosen for its brevity), there are multiple such statements in the introduction consistent with Timmermans’ use of Sudnow. Elsewhere Sudnow points readers who are interested “in the sociological aspects of the problems of ‘dying’ and ‘death’” to the appendices. It certainly appears that Sudnow sees his work as focused on a particular substantive area and from the reference to sociology here, and in many other places, as firmly located within sociology.

In light of Carlin’s reference to Timmermans’ “misunderstanding (or misrepresentation) of the ethnomethodological programme,” I read Sudnow for explicit references to ethnomethodology. I read the preface, the introduction, the conclusion, the appendices, and all the headings and subheadings in the book, and could not find “ethnomethodology” named. Yes, there are multiple clues to Sudnow’s ethnomethodological orientation (that Garfinkel and Sacks are thanked, and, Carlin notes, Garfinkel was Sudnow’s chair), but there is no evidence in Sudnow’s text that Garfinkel objected to Sudnow’s reference to sociology. Carlin even seems to acknowledge this in a footnote, “Sudnow did not claim that his book was ‘well representative of ‘ethnomethodological’ sociology,’ but the contemporaneous points of contact warrant its descriptions as an ‘ethnomethodologically informed ethnography.’ This acknowledgement raises additional questions for me about the fairness of Carlin’s criticism of Timmermans’ use of Sudnow.

Drawing again on the block quote, Carlin suggests further that “Timmermans fails to address the importance of Sudnow’s subtitle—The Social Organization of Dying—wherein Sudnow demonstrates the plenitude of interactional phenomena involved in dealing with death.” But earlier, in his text, prior to the block quote Carlin cites, Timmermans says,

in ethnomethodological fashion, Sudnow underscored how “death” and “dying” emerged out of the interactions and practices of health care
providers, “what has been developed is a ‘procedural definition of dying,’ a definition based upon the activities which that phenomenon can be said to consist in.”

So I’m not clear how Timmermans has failed to at least acknowledge Sudnow’s use of interactional phenomena. Carlin nevertheless expands this criticism to what Timmermans cannot see and why, asserting “Timmermans cannot see the procedural focus of ethnomethodological studies because his conceptual framework is wedded to structure/agency dualism.” While I think the question of the extent to which Timmermans work assumes a structure/agency dualism is a worthwhile one, I don’t think it is adequately addressed in Carlin’s critique of Timmermans. I won’t proceed further down this path, but a fair reading would provide illustrations of how Timmermans’ conceptual framework is located within structure/agency dualism and an explanation of how the quote I just cited is not a counter-example to this assertion.

With respect to “ethnomethodological indifference,” the question Carlin raises about Timmermans’ concern that “‘Sudnow did not question the implication of the rampant social inequality’” does give me pause. But even here, Carlin’s reiteration of Timmermans’ quote leaves off two important words “Sudnow did not question the implication of the rampant social inequality he exposed” which does shift the meaning. So, when Carlin says “to argue that Sudnow ignored inequalities is disingenuous,” he seems to miss Timmermans’ acknowledgement that Sudnow exposed inequalities. Of course, whether Sudnow addresses the concept of ethnomethodological indifference is also relevant to the fairness of Carlin’s critique of Timmermans. I did note that Timmerman’s critique of Sudnow did not appear to acknowledge Sudnow’s closing comment, which suggests to me that Sudnow did consider implications:

I would argue the need for a closer and more nationwide examination of how the deaths of patients are decided and how the decisions that a patient is “dying” are made. I think a careful look must be taken at the possibility of discriminatory treatment in the care for the “dying” and “dead” based upon social class and related variables.

I would be interested in Carlin’s take on the extent to which this might violate the principle of ethnomethodological indifference or reflect Sudnow’s leaving “this task ... to users of ethnomethodological research.”

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38 Timmermans 1998, 466.
40 Carlin 2016, 5.
41 Carlin 2016, 5.
42 The full sentence appears in the block quote at the top of page 5 in Carlin, but not in the reiteration of the sentence at the bottom of page 5 where Carlin illustrates his critique.
43 Carlin 2016, 5.
44 Sudnow 1967, 164.
45 Carlin 2016, 6.
With all that argued, would it have been possible to mount a fairer critique of Timmermans that reflects Carlin’s concerns about differing epistemologies? I believe the answer is yes. It would have to begin, however, with careful attention to the stated purposes of Timmermans and Sudnow, the ways in which they represented and explained their disciplinary affiliations, and textual evidence illustrating what Timmermans may have missed in comparing his study to Sudnow’s. Here’s one way to approach it.

In Sudnow’s appendices, where he describes “the sociological aspects of death and dying,” he makes clear (especially in the footnotes), why the concept of dying is problematic for the sociologist and how it needs to be construed in the organization of activities. Importantly for Carlin’s critique of Timmermans, Sudnow distinguishes his work on death and dying, from that of Glaser and Strauss, as follows:

A key difference between my approach and theirs, is that in their analysis, what ‘dying’ consists of is not treated as a problematic phenomenon. Their central interest, of considerable social-psychological importance, is the management of information in interaction; their central issue is ‘awareness of dying’ and for their purposes what ‘dying’ is has not been accorded central attention. I have found it necessary, being less concerned with interaction between staff and patient and more concerned with the organization of ward activities, to regard the very phenomenon of ‘dying’ as troublesome, an understanding of its sense requiring location of those practices which its use warrants.46

Turning back to Timmermans, he glosses over this distinction Sudnow draws between the epistemologies of Glaser and Strauss and his own, as in the following quotation:
In death and dying, the fervor of the staff's intervention depends mostly on the patient’s perceived social worth.47

Moreover, the evidence Timmermans cites tends to emphasize his interviews with the staff, including their perceptions of when it’s appropriate to intervene, over the observations of process that Sudnow emphasizes. These seem like meaningful distinctions, consistent with Carlin’s assertions, but grounded in the nuance of the relevant texts. Of course, I have not taken the time to do full due diligence, which would have included a full rereading of Timmermans’ text to see if it is consistent with the generalized assertion I just made. While I think the distinction Carlin draws between epistemologies assuming a structure/agency dualism and one that eschews such assumptions is an important one, it is not well described by contrasting ethnomethodology with “sociology,” as I’ll argue below.

**General Issues Entailed in Crossing Epistemological Boundaries for Different Purposes**

At this point, I’ll leave behind Carlin’s representation of Timmermans and Timmermans’ of Sudnow to turn to some broader issues entailed in working across epistemological boundaries Carlin’s text raises. Carlin’s generalizations regarding ethnomethodology,
traditional sociology, and sociology raise some additional questions regarding the representation of disciplines in interdisciplinary work. Citing Sharrock and Watson, Carlin argues that ethnomethodology’s (EM’s) aims, and its subject matter, are not those of sociology; indeed, it is incommensurable with sociology. Without recognizing incommensurable statuses, criticisms of EM based upon traditional sociological assumptions may have less analytic impact because EM and sociology are internally incompatible.

This raises a number of questions. First is the question of whether EM is a subdiscipline within sociology or a distinct discipline, as the article’s focus on interdisciplinary might lead readers to expect. Carlin’s occasional references to intradisciplinarity suggest the former, although bold assertions like those in the text cited above create some ambiguity. It would help if Carlin’s text was more consistent about the relationship between EM and “sociology”. Whatever the relationship Carlin sees between EM and sociology, the contrast between one tradition, and a discipline that subsumes multiple traditions is problematic. Carlin’s text is at its most educative when it is referring to the underlying epistemological issues:

This contrast between EM and sociology pertains to the polarization of sociology in terms of structure and agency, where certain forms of sociology emphasize structure at the expense of agency, and vice versa. It is the persistence of this dualism that distorts “the conception which most sociologists have of ethnomethodology’s wider implications.”

However, bold statements about incompatibility between ethnomethodology and sociology risk misleading readers about the very nature of a discipline like sociology. What does it mean to say that one tradition is incommensurable or incompatible with a constellation of traditions all of which are complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic? Consider, for instance, sociologist of science Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory (ANT); is ethnomethodology incommensurable with ANT in the same way it might be incommensurable traditions reflecting the structure-agency dualism? Latour, who describes ANT (in part) as focusing on “a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements,” acknowledges its affinities with ethnomethodology. Is the word “traditional” supposed to address that? But traditions are continually evolving as Abbott, who Carlin cites, illustrates with his concept fractals; is “traditional” relevant in 2016 to the epistemological distinction Carlin draws? More precise comparisons are needed to educate readers about epistemologies at the disciplinary level.

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49 Carlin 2016, 7.
50 Sharrock and Watson 1988, 57; Carlin 2016, 7.
Returning to the guidelines suggested in Carlin’s introduction: As I noted at the outset, Carlin’s critique of Timmermans for divorcing Sudnow from the ethnomethodological corpus suggests that he sees knowledge of the disciplinary corpus (as well as the author’s oeuvre) as important for interdisciplinary citations. While I agree that such knowledge is important for some purposes, especially purposes involving generalizations about a (sub)discipline (as Carlin has done with ethnomethodology and sociology), I would argue that it is not necessary, or even viable, for some other purposes, and that to require it might undermine our ability to learn about social problems from the many different and evolving (epistemological) perspectives in social research. I worry further about the generalizing assumption that “the literature... refers to recognized and relevant collections of work according to context” and that “attempts to fit ‘literature’ to research projects” (1) are problematic.\[^{54}\]

While there are certainly recognized bodies of work, that might be owned by those who locate their work within them, bodies of literature can be and are constructed by researchers addressing particular issues for particular purposes. Consider, for instance, Sudnow’s first footnote, which draws together “an extensive literature available on death” from literary treatments, anthropological literature, psychiatric literature, medical literature, and literature associated with various substantive areas like funeral practices, death and the family, hospital social structure, and medical students.\[^{55}\] The rest of the footnotes and appendices similarly draw heavily on literature from multiple disciplines. Should Sudnow be expected to be familiar with the corpora from which each of the studies he cited came? If he had left reference to this literature out (for lack of full knowledge of the disciplinary corpus), would the study have been stronger? Would his readers have been better informed about death and dying within the hospital environment?

Again, the purpose, I’d argue, shapes the way in which literature use should be judged. A more generally relevant expectation might be that the cited articles are fairly represented for the purposes of the citation and that the collected body of articles cited is appropriate to the interpretations and generalizations the citing author is making.

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References


\[^{54}\] Carlin 2016, 1.

\[^{55}\] Sudnow 1967, 165.


