

You said:

What are the main aspects of Garfinkel's critique of Parsons' take on Durkheim

ChatGPT said:

Harold Garfinkel's engagement with Talcott Parsons and Émile Durkheim unfolds in two moves:

- (1) a sustained critique of Parsons's Durkheim, and
- (2) the construction of a radically different, ethnomethodological Durkheim.

Below are the main points, as Garfinkel himself and later commentators consistently frame them.

I. Garfinkel's critique of Parsons's reading of Durkheim

1. Norms are treated as external rules rather than members' accomplishments
Parsons reads Durkheimian norms as pre-existing value standards that actors internalize and then follow. Garfinkel argues this turns norms into explanatory abstractions that float above practice.
For Garfinkel, norms are not causes of action. They are products of action, continuously produced and recognized in situ.

2. Parsons substitutes analytic order for lived order

Parsons's systems theory explains order by invoking:
shared values
normative integration
systemic requirements

Garfinkel's critique: this confuses the sociologist's analytic reconstruction with the order that participants themselves must produce moment by moment. Parsons explains order after the fact; Garfinkel asks how order is done.

3. The "cultural dope" problem

Garfinkel famously charged that Parsonian actors are treated as "cultural dopes":
passively following norms,
mechanically guided by internalized values.

Against this, Garfinkel insists that actors are skilled, methodical, reflexive practitioners who actively interpret, negotiate, and repair social situations.

4. Normative explanations ignore accountability practices

Parsons emphasizes conformity to norms; Garfinkel shifts attention to accountability:
how actions are made observable, reportable, and intelligible to others
how participants demonstrate that what they are doing "counts as" normal,

reasonable, or moral

Parsons explains why order should exist; Garfinkel investigates how people show order to one another.

II. Garfinkel's new interpretation of Durkheim

Garfinkel does not reject Durkheim. He claims to recover a more radical Durkheim than Parsons allowed.

1. Durkheim's "objective reality of social facts" reinterpreted

Where Parsons treats social facts as macro-level constraints, Garfinkel re-reads Durkheim's dictum ("treat social facts as things") as a methodological instruction

Social facts are observable accomplishments, not hidden structures.

They are "objective" because:

members treat them as objective,

they are publicly accountable and inspectable.

2. Moral order as a practical achievement

Garfinkel argues that Durkheim's moral order is not a value system hovering above action, but something produced in ordinary practices:

queueing

conversation turn-taking

classroom instruction

legal procedures

Morality resides in how people make actions recognizably right, wrong, appropriate, or out of place.

3. Ethnomethods as the foundation of social order

Garfinkel's key move is to replace Parsonian norms with ethnomethods:
the practical methods members use to make sense of situations
background expectancies that are used, not obeyed

This becomes the core of ethnomethodology.

4. Breaching experiments as Durkheimian demonstrations

Garfinkel's breaching experiments are explicitly Durkheimian:
they reveal the taken-for-granted moral order
they show how violations provoke repair, sanction, and explanation
Order appears not as stability but as repair work.

5. From values to reflexivity

Parsons's Durkheim → values integrate action

Garfinkel's Durkheim → reflexivity sustains action

Reflexivity here means: actions are designed to be recognizable as what they are descriptions of action are themselves part of the action

III. The fundamental divergence (in one contrast)

Parsons
Norms explain action
Values are internalized
Order is systemic
Actor is norm-following
Durkheim = moral consensus

Garfinkel
Action produces norms
Accountability is displayed
Order is local and practical
Actor is methodically competent
Durkheim = practical moral work

Bottom line

Garfinkel's critique is not that Parsons misunderstood Durkheim entirely, but that he domesticated him.

Garfinkel's Durkheim:

is not a theorist of value systems,
but a theorist of how moral order is accomplished in practice.

This reinterpretation profoundly reshaped sociology, influencing conversation analysis, studies of work, education (including McDermott & Varenne), and the micro-foundations of social order.

If you'd like, I can:

trace this argument directly through Studies in Ethnomethodology
show how Garfinkel reads Suicide differently from Parsons
connect this to McDermott's classroom analyses as Durkheimian ethnomethodology