Book review

Ethnomethodology and Disability Studies: A Reflection on Robillard¹


“The field work is not recommended.” Robillard, p. 51

Introduction

I met Britt Robillard the first time when he was a senior graduate student at UCLA in the early 1970s, studying sociology with Harold Garfinkel. I was a new to UCLA and had met Garfinkel only very recently. Britt was one of his favorite students. He had an office at a far end of the second floor of Haines Hall, in what was affectionately termed the dissertation “pig pen.” I met him there, Harold having taken me specifically to do so. Britt was a large, quick-witted, and good-looking man. I remember his smile, which was disarming, and his humor. At that time he was writing about Heidegger and ethnomethodology. Harold introduced him to me because I had come to “ethno” from an undergraduate background in philosophy and had read some Heidegger, although I can’t ever recall our having discussed that topic. I became an acquaintance of Britt’s at that time. We discovered that we had both grown up in Queens, New York City. We knew each other and occasionally had conversations about ethnomethodology and Harold Garfinkel, to this day a favorite topic for us.

The next thing I remember clearly about Britt was his sharing with me a strange thing that had happened to him; he had kicked his wife out of bed in the middle of the night. Upon questioning, he clarified that he had “literally” kicked her and knocked her off the bed. Later he shared that he had punched her once in the middle of the night as well. I remember thinking that Britt must have a lot of deeply repressed anger against his wife. Thus, I may have been one of the relatively early persons to misread and misunderstand what was occurring to him. Like some others, I provided a psychiatric frame for what Britt told me, having no clue at the time that a motor-neuronal frame
would have been much more appropriate since, in retrospect, these obviously were early signs of Britt’s motor neuron disease.

After Britt left UCLA I lost touch with him for many years. I learned through the “ethno grapevine” that he had worked at Michigan and then moved to Hawaii. Later on I found out that he had become severely disabled. At an ethnomethodology conference in Boston I remember speaking with Harold about Britt, and being stunned to hear of the degree of his disability. I remember thinking at that time, since I was already deeply involved in disability research and disability studies, that Britt would be a good person with whom to get in touch.

I took the occasion of the publication of my book *A World Without Words* to do so. That was in 1994, several years after I had heard about Britt’s disability and more than fifteen years since I had last seen or spoken with him. I sent him the book. Months passed. Then I heard from Britt one evening through e-mail. It was a short e-mail, one of the first I had received in reaction to my book. It read as follows, “David, I think your book is beautiful.” That review remains today one of the most meaningful reviews of my work, because I knew from whom it came. Though short, it signified a lot. As Britt writes in his book, he has a “uniquely adequate” set of credentials with which to write about both ethnomethodology and disability. No other reviewer, at least of whom I am aware, can read my book in his way.

That e-mail has led to regular and sometimes lengthy exchanges between us for the past seven years. I actually have not seen Britt since 1979 I believe. But I have through e-mail shared many of the events that he narrates in his book that occurred after 1994. I am thoroughly pleased to have urged him to write his book. I had a telephone conversation with Irv Zola about Britt in 1993, just before Irv’s death. Irv had visited Hawaii and also spoke with Britt about turning his sociological expertise to his own experience as a person with disability. Irv would have been very pleased that Britt eventually took his advice.

**Locating Meaning of Disability As A Text**

Upon receiving some bad reviews of an early article I had submitted to a journal Garfinkel introduced me to Nietzsche’s aphorism, “Writing is like a magic mirror; when an ape looks in, a saint will not look back.” That remark destroyed forever the idea that there could ever be an authoritative reading of any text. Further among all the different readings that one might make of a text, certain ones may not be as accurate, interesting or fruitful as others. In this paper, I am going to explicate two beneficial ways of reading Robillard’s book, as a contribution to the research literature in ethnomethodology and as a part of the corpus of research in disability research. These particular reflections in the mirror of Britt’s writing clearly display my own interests