

Goffman, Erving (1922–1982)

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Abstract

This entry outlines Goffman's biography, sketches the importance of the intellectual and social contexts provided by the universities of Toronto and Chicago where Goffman studied in the 1940s and 1950s, and summarizes his major substantive contributions (dramaturgy, the interaction order, the significance of the ritual dimension, his treatments of mental patients, the stigmatized, gender, and the concept of frame and the framing process). The continuing relevance of Goffman's ideas to contemporary sociology is examined.

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The work of Erving Goffman centered on explicating the structures and processes of the "interaction order," the domain of social life brought about and facilitated by the physical co-presence of persons. In a series of widely-read writings published from the early 1950s through the early 1980s, Goffman developed an utterly singular vision of social life, expressed in a highly distinctive language that reflected his extraordinary observational acuity and his unmatched sociological grasp of metaphor and irony.

Born in Mannville, Alberta, Canada, to Jewish migrants from the Ukraine, Erving Manual Goffman was educated at the universities of Manitoba (1939–1942), Toronto (BA, 1945) and Chicago (MA, 1949; PhD, 1953). His doctoral studies included a spell at Edinburgh University's department of social anthropology, which sponsored and funded 12 months of fieldwork on the remote Shetland island of Unst. Following research posts at Chicago and with the National Institute of Mental Health (where he conducted fieldwork at St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, DC, for *Asylums*), he was appointed to the faculty of the University of California, Berkeley's sociology department in 1958, becoming a full professor in 1962. While teaching at Berkeley he influenced a number of graduate students, including John Lofland, Dorothy Smith, David Sudnow, and Harvey Sacks. He also used his proximity to

Nevada to undertake participant observation of casino life, first as a gambler, then as a dealer. Goffman relocated to the University of Pennsylvania in 1968, where his work became increasingly sensitized to sociolinguistic and gender issues. He remained there until his death in 1982 from stomach cancer.

Goffman's primary contribution to sociology was to show how social interaction was fundamentally organized in social terms and amenable to close sociological investigation. He demonstrated how the building blocks of social encounters – the talk, gestures, expressions, and postures that humans constantly produce and readily recognize – were responsive not to individual psychology or social structural constraints but to the locally specific demands of the face-to-face social situation. This central analytic aim was pursued through a score of papers and eleven widely read books, including *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), *Asylums* (1961), *Stigma* (1963), and *Frame Analysis* (1974). In opening the interaction order as a distinct subarea of sociology Goffman brought a novel analytic attitude, a spirit of inquiry, and a persistent skepticism that connected narrow disciplinary concerns to wider social currents.

Intellectual and Social Contexts

While Goffman's sociological project was unprecedented, his development of the sociology of the interaction order bore the imprint of the early social and intellectual contexts he encountered. Often characterized as a leading exponent of symbolic interactionism, Goffman brought a modulated determinism and critical edge to this perspective that owed something to the cultural influence of his Canadian heritage. At Toronto important influences were anthropologist C.W.M. Hart, who introduced students to then-untranslated portions of Durkheim, and the founder of kinesics, Ray Birdwhistell, whose class exercises involved close observation of ordinary behavior in natural settings.

These initial interests were firmed up after 1945 when Goffman joined the talented cohort of students and faculty often described as the second Chicago School of Sociology. Chicago proved to be the crucible in which a number of critical influences were condensed into the distinctive approach now immediately identifiable as "Goffman's sociology." Social psychological, sociological, anthropological, and literary lines of influence shaped the emergent Goffman. First, there was the legacy of G.H. Mead's social psychology, codified as

“symbolic interactionism” by Mead’s student Herbert Blumer in 1937. While Goffman absorbed Mead’s teachings about the formation of self through social interaction, he did so critically, acknowledging that in complex contemporary societies where the sources of moral consensus were increasingly differentiated, role-taking was often more problematic than Mead envisaged. Cooley and Dewey were also major influences. A leading sociological stimulus was Simmel’s formal sociology, mediated via the Chicago School’s founding figure, Robert E. Park, who attended Simmel’s lectures at Berlin. One of Park’s students, Everett C. Hughes (whom Goffman considered his most important teacher at Chicago), passed the Simmel torch to the postwar generation. Simmel’s pioneering “sociational” conception of society that prioritized interactions between persons over large-scale structures and institutions was congenial to Goffman, as was his proposal that sociology’s core method was to extract the “formal” features of sociation. As a formal sociologist, Goffman sought to elucidate and analyze a variety of forms of the interaction order, such as the basic kinds of facework, the forms of alienation from interaction, the arts of impression management, or the stages of remedial interchange. The anthropological influence on Goffman’s thought derives from the late “symbolic” Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. This line of influence passed from Durkheim to British social anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown – whom Goffman almost met in 1950 – through to W. Lloyd Warner (another significant Chicago teacher, and adviser for the research element of Goffman’s two graduate degrees). The literary influence was represented by Kenneth Burke’s writings, especially from *Permanence and Change* (1935), from which Goffman extracted Burke’s method of perspective by incongruity, evident in the many irreverent comparisons and unexpected contrasts that became a Goffman trademark. Burke himself apparently approved of *Presentation of Self* as a sociological application of his own dramatistic approach.

These lineage lines contextualize the formation of Goffman’s sociology, but do not explain its unique shape and preoccupations. Goffman grew exasperated by critics who sought to label – and thus assimilate – his ideas to sociology’s major paradigms. In his view, sociological traditions were there to be creatively applied and modified, not slavishly followed. Throughout his career Goffman showed a remarkable facility to respond to and incorporate into his analyses ideas drawn from other theoretical approaches (game theory, ethology, phenomenology, feminism, conversation analysis, and discourse analysis). While his writings displayed clear systematic intent, the drive to build a single system was absent.

Goffman was much more at home with the essay mode, never providing a final cumulative statement of his sociology. His judgment was that interaction analysis was too undeveloped to aspire to anything more than some robust conceptual distinctions. More than many significant twentieth-century sociologists, Goffman's oeuvre demands to be reconstructed by the reader; Goffman did not provide any obvious interpretive key to his work.

Major Substantive Contributions

Goffman burst onto the scene with the 1959 US publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, a book that breathed new life into the ancient "all the world's a stage" metaphor. Embarking from a psychobiology that emphasized the immediate symbolic functions of the expressions humans constantly "give" (through the content of their talk) and "give off" or exude (through tone, posture, gesture, facial expression, and the like) when in the presence of others, Goffman brilliantly analyzed the "dramaturgical" aspects of this conduct. Using a wide range of illustrative materials – ranging from respectable treatises, ethnographies, and social histories through memoirs, popular journalism, and novelistic accounts to his own acute observations of human conduct – Goffman showed how interactional details could be cogently understood in sociological terms as "performances" presented to an "audience" and requiring cooperative "teamwork" among performers to bring off a desired definition of the situation. Performances may be presented in "front" regions (such as workplaces or formal ceremonial settings) that are usually differentiated by "barriers to perception" from "back regions," the backstage areas (bathrooms, restaurant kitchens, private offices) where performers prepare themselves. Goffman went on to examine how "discrepant roles" and "communication out of character" can threaten the presented reality. A recurrent theme in his writings was that successful interaction needs not Parsonsian role-players enacting the institutionalized obligations and expectations of a status, but rather "interactants" skilled in "the arts of impression management."

In Goffman's subsequent writings a range of figures – notably game, ritual, and ethological metaphors – were used as methodological devices to highlight otherwise taken-for-granted features of social encounters. Face-to-face interaction was a species of social order, which he named "the interaction order" (a term coined in his 1953 PhD dissertation,

then seemingly forgotten, and only revived for his posthumously published, valedictory American Sociological Association Presidential Address; see Goffman 1983). Confining his analytical attention to this face-to-face realm of embodied expression, Goffman produced both systematic examinations of the general forms of the interaction order (including *Behavior in Public Places*, 1963; *Relations in Public*, 1971; and *Forms of Talk*, 1981) and dissections of certain of its problematic aspects (notably *Asylums*, 1961; *Stigma*, 1963; and *Gender Advertisements*, 1979). Though Goffman always sought to maintain his own distinct position, his later work was increasingly preoccupied with issues that ethnomethodology had brought to the fore of sociological analysis, and his longest book, *Frame Analysis* (1974), can be read as a sustained response to Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). One major point of difference was the social self, which was for Goffman an abiding sociological referent.

Most generally, Goffman's interaction analysis acknowledged the centrality of informational (or "communicative" or "system") and ritual demands on interaction. The former concerned the communication and control of information given and exuded by the interactant (mood, intention, competence, trustworthiness, etc.) and was ultimately constrained by the physical limits of the human body's sensory capacities. Goffman mobilized dramaturgy and game theory to analyze the levels of mutual awareness that can emerge in inference making in ordinary encounters. It was these emphases that yielded complaints about Goffman's "cynical" or "Machiavellian" view of human nature. The ritual model offered very different imagery. Ritual elements concern the expression and control of the interactant's feelings toward both self and others. Here Goffman creatively adapted Durkheim's theory of religion, applying it to the secular world of social encounters. In his work on facework, deference and demeanor, and supportive and remedial interchanges, Goffman showed how greetings and farewells, apologies, and avoidance practices illustrated the need for persons to monitor their interactional conduct when in the presence of that sacred deity, the self of the other. From first to last, Goffman was a Durkheim revisionist.

Goffman's analyses constantly distinguished out-of-awareness features of encounters that, once identified, become instantly recognizable. His pivotal distinction between focused and unfocused interaction is a case in point. Focused interaction, with its single joint focus of attention (e.g., a card game, a conversation, a physical task jointly carried out), is straightforward enough to grasp. But unfocused interaction, when persons

orient their conduct simply by virtue of the co-presence of others (e.g., walking down a busy street), opens up for sociology hitherto unenvisioned sources of social orderliness. A rule of “civil inattention” constrains the conduct of unacquainted others on the street, persons walking past each other silently being likened to passing cars dipping their lights. Civil inattention is one of a special class of social rules that regulate interaction known as “situational proprieties,” departures from which Goffman found especially instructive. Situational *improprieties* were less a matter of psychopathology as they were an expression of alienation from the community, social establishments, social relationships, and encounters.

Goffman arrived at this conclusion after his monumental study of the plight of mental patients in *Asylums* and his psychologically astute analysis of the identity implications of departures from normality in *Stigma*. Like his dissertation, in *Asylums* Goffman strove to overcome the limitations of his case study by generating an analytic ethnography that pursued selected conceptual themes. The mental hospital was seen as part of the larger class of “total institutions” that also included prisons, concentration camps, and monasteries. Social processes of “mortification” were common to them all. Mental patients underwent shared changes in self-conception – a shared “moral career” that was at once cause and consequence of their current predicament as they were sucked into a “betrayal funnel.” Patients developed an underlife, rich in “secondary adjustments,” which created space for conceptions of self at odds with officially prescribed conceptions. The practice of psychiatry was described as a form of service work, a “tinkering trade” that offered precious little real service to the mental patient. *Asylums*, however, was not simply an influential critique of mental hospitals that brought Goffman to the attention of nonsociological audiences; it remains a vivid exploration of resistance to authority and the social sources of selfhood under extreme conditions.

Stigma also drew acclaim from outside academic sociology. It provided a careful analysis of normality and those temporarily or more extensively excluded from full social acceptance. Although Goffman defined a stigma as a “deeply discrediting attribute” and was much concerned with the situation of groups such as the disfigured, the differently abled, and ethnic minorities, his emphasis was once again on acts and relationships, not personal attributes. *Stigma* also anticipated identity politics. Later, and in part in response to his feminist-oriented students, Goffman presented an “institutional reflexivity” theory that saw

gender differences as a thoroughly social construction. He illustrated his approach to gender difference through an analysis of some 500 advertising images in *Gender Advertisements*, a book that still stands as an unrivaled piece of visual sociology. While Goffman's thinking on gender difference did not attract the acclaim of his earlier ideas, it anticipated many of the key points of Judith Butler's celebrated performative theory by more than a decade, and showed Goffman's continuing sensitivity to social currents beyond the academy.

Goffman deepened his perspective with his longest book, *Frame Analysis*, which provided a modulated phenomenological dimension to his sociology. Frames are perceptual principles that order events, sustained in both mind and activity. For Goffman, frames were constantly shifting features of situational social life, analyzable into primary frameworks and two kinds of transformed frame, the keying and the fabrication. We can make sense of two persons quarreling in terms of a primary framework, a "domestic argument," but can also come to see it as keyed if the couple are rehearsing a scene in a play, or as fabricated if one party is being set up for a reality TV program. Frames structure events, but our understandings can also be altered if participants seek to shift from a literal frame to a joking one. Goffman emphasized both the determinative characteristic of frames and the capacity of interactants to change the currently prevailing frame. This theme was refined in his last book, *Forms of Talk*, where the concept of "footing" was designed to capture the shifting alignments of persons to their own and others' talk. Goffman's later work focused more consistently on the syntactical relations between the acts of co-present persons, but the self did not disappear from view. Goffman's earlier two-selves viewpoint (where an unsocialized self seems to lie behind the presented self, directing it) gives way to a more sociologically consistent view of the self as a "changeable formula" with no more depth than is encoded in interactional conduct.

Relevance to History of Contemporary Sociology

One of the more readable (and certainly one of the most quotable) of twentieth-century sociologists, Goffman's deceptively accessible writings can be understood at many levels and in a range of different ways. This is evident in the proliferation of a range of readings of his ideas: interactionist, structuralist, existentialist, ethogenic, modernist, and postmodernist. His sociology attracted extremes of assessment from extravagant

commendation to outright dismissal – the latter evaluations tending to originate from within sociology. The core of these objections concerned his cavalier approach to questions of method. Goffman was master of his own craft and did not have a method in the conventional sense of a set of teachable procedures. His apparent indifference to questions about method stemmed from a conviction that actual research practice was always going to be at variance with proclaimed methodological procedures. Alternative valuations concentrated on Goffman's artful use of a range of rhetorical devices. Goffman's texts adopted a distinct format made up of several components: the essay mode; conceptual framework development as a preferred discursive structure; pressing the deployment of metaphor to the point of exhaustion; and use of a range of sociological tropes, including perspective by incongruity, parataxis, irony, and humor. However, the deconstruction of Goffman's texts in this way does not explain the ongoing fertility of his ideas. The brilliance and idiosyncrasy of his sociological project has so far proved a tough act to follow.

In the image originally articulated by Simmel, Goffman left a cash legacy to be spent as successors considered fit. The primarily conceptual character of Goffman's legacy has proved to be adaptable to a variety of analytic enterprises. Theoretically, Goffman's ideas played an important role in the grand syntheses of Giddens and Habermas. Practically, *Asylums* impacted the deinstitutionalization movements of the 1960s and 1970s. *Stigma* remains a pivotal text for groups advancing the interests of the differently abled. In empirical terms, researchers have developed more fully explanatory theory from Goffman's initial conceptions. Examples include theories of politeness, interaction ritual chains, the centrality of frame analysis to social movements theory, and social psychological versions of impression management theory. Ethnographers of various hues have been equipped with an extensive and powerful analytic vocabulary. As might be expected from the cash legacy notion, the influence of Goffman's sociology, both direct and diffuse, continues to be far-reaching.

SEE ALSO: Blumer, Herbert George; Dramaturgy; Facework; Frame; Impression Formation; Interaction; Interaction Order; Public Realm; Simmel, Georg; Stigma; Symbolic Interaction

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