



ERVING
GOFFMAN
and
Modern Sociology

PHILIP MANNING

Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology

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Philip Manning

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Introduction and Overview

INTRODUCTION

In this book I present a brief, but comprehensive, account of the ideas of Erving Goffman (1922–82), and show why these ideas are central to modern sociology. The idea that Goffman is central to sociology is mildly ironic, because he is often remembered as an outsider, a brilliant maverick, a one of a kind genius, a man who is “bleakly knowing” about modern urban life. From this view, he is a dispassionate observer who sees through our day-to-day performances and self-presentations. For example, Gary Marx tells us that “Goffman presented himself as a detached, hard-boiled cynic, the sociologist as 1940s private eye. His was a hip, existential, cool, personal style” (1984: 637). Although there is truth to this view, it does have one limitation: it plays down Goffman’s commitment to the development of sociology. His acute observations about everyday life were not only meant to make us think again about our day-to-day behavior; they were also part of an abstract analysis of social interaction. For many years Goffman tried to develop a general theory of face-to-face interaction, a theory that could be used to interpret any social exchange, whether it took place in a bar or a boardroom. However, despite his

enthusiasm for this general theory, he also remained extremely skeptical about the possibility of discovering such a general theory. It is as if he were committed to finding this theory at one moment and indifferent to it at the next.

For his supporters, it is the tension between his attempt to develop a theory of social interaction and his doubts that such a theory exists that makes his work so provoking. For his critics, this tension makes Goffman inconsistent, and his books hard to interpret. Often Goffman seems to have two contradictory “voices”: one voice tells of a general pattern beneath different examples of ordinary behavior, while the other emphasizes the crucial differences between examples.

Although Goffman’s attempt to develop a general theory of face-to-face interaction is fascinating in its own right, it also raises a question. Is it possible for sociologists to develop a general sociological theory, a theory both of institutions and social interaction? In his introduction to *Frame Analysis*, Goffman wrote about the limits of his own work while supporting the ambitious projects pursued by other sociologists:

I make no claim to be talking about the core matters of sociology – social organization and social structure. . . . I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives. I personally hold society to be first in every way and any individual’s current involvements to be second.
(1974: 13)

In the final chapter I look at one attempt to develop a general theory of “the structure of social life” using Goffman’s ideas. This is the structuration theory developed by Anthony Giddens. This theory thrusts Goffman to the center of contemporary debates about the relationship between structure and agency. In the later chapters in this book I suggest that in order to theorize agency it is necessary to understand the use of rules in everyday life. I suggest that Goffman offers an incomplete account of rule-

following, and that his ideas have to be supplemented with insights from ethnomethodology. I do not see Goffman as a precursor to ethnomethodology; rather, I believe that a combination of his ideas with theirs provides an important resource for mainstream sociology. I also believe that Giddens's theory is the best available vehicle for their delivery.

There are many ways of describing Goffman: he can be seen as a one of a kind observer, a cynic, an ethnographer, a symbolic interactionist. In this book, I portray Goffman as someone with competing visions, as someone who sees both cynical manipulation and trust in social interaction, as someone who sees sociology as both cumulative science and as humanistic enquiry, as someone who sees his own work as both a loose set of acute insights and as an organized description of the basic elements face-to-face interaction.

However, this is in the future. In the rest of this chapter I play the book as a whole on fast forward, anticipating and sketching the ideas that will be considered in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Goffman was primarily an observer of face-to-face interaction who possessed an extraordinary ability to appreciate the subtle importance of apparently insignificant aspects of everyday conduct. Goffman made his readers aware of this almost invisible realm of social life, with the result that the banal exchanges and glances observable in any public place become a continual source of fascination. With the exception of Simmel's, his general descriptions of face-to-face interaction are unmatched.

Let me begin with a biographical preliminary. Born in Canada in 1922, Goffman obtained a BA degree in sociology and anthropology from the University of Toronto in 1945. A chance meeting with Everett Hughes persuaded him to move to Chicago for graduate work, which led to a doctoral thesis about social interaction on a small island community off the coast of Scotland. The thesis was actually written in Paris, where he was exposed to the then fashionable doctrine of existentialism. After completing his Ph.D.

at the end of 1953, and unable to obtain a tenure track position, he worked for Edward Shils on a project concerning social stratification. During this time he wrote the first edition of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In 1956, a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health allowed him to move to Washington, DC to study the experience of inmates at a large urban mental hospital. In 1961, Herbert Blumer invited him to join the sociology faculty at the University of California at Berkeley. After six intellectually successful years at Berkeley, he spent a transitional year as a Visiting Fellow at Harvard, before moving to the University of Pennsylvania in 1968, where he remained until his death of cancer in 1982, at the age of 60.

Throughout his writings Goffman worked to develop a vocabulary that could describe the general features of face-to-face interaction. Although this was primarily a problem of description, it also meant that he had to explain the motivations behind everyday behavior. As a result his work contains many “how” and “why” accounts. For example, he discussed both the odd behavior of people in elevators, describing the way they stare at their feet or the floor numbers above the door and the reasons why this behavior is important to others sharing the elevator. We can understand his work as a kind of map to the uncharted world of everyday life. Goffman saves us from over-familiarity, allowing us to see the complexity, stability, and importance of apparently mundane social interaction.

Curiously, we are quite unable to explain how or even why we do most of the things that we do with supreme practical ease in our daily lives. Whether walking down a street or answering a phone call, the way we perform these activities is both more intricately patterned and more important than most of us could believe possible. In our daily lives we often act on autopilot: we comply with a set of implicit instructions that govern our behavior. Social life is patterned because we often choose to follow these instructions and thereby make the world predictable. Predictability is an astonishing collective accomplishment.

Even subtle departures from such patterns can undermine our confidence that the social world is as it appears to be. Departures are understandable if they replace the prevailing definition of the situation with another; they are destructive if they cannot be interpreted. One of the major legacies of Goffman's work is that it shows us how the fragility of day-to-day life is lent solidity and order by small gestures and ritual offerings. Many of the details of face-to-face encounters (which we frequently fail to notice) reappear in his books as examples of how our trust in an otherwise unruly environment is maintained. For example, when a man apologizes for inadvertently stepping in front of someone in a queue, it is easy to miss the way he touches her elbow as he speaks; but it is this physical contact that assures her of the sincerity of the apology.

With the help of many examples Goffman identified the factors that underpin our confidence in the social world. He typically convinces us of this by suggesting scenarios in which that world suddenly becomes quite alien and startling. For example, when we pass pedestrians in the street, we routinely establish eye contact for a moment, only to then look away. This gesture is a ritual courtesy that affirms respect among strangers in a small and almost unnoticeable way. However, to maintain that eye contact for even an extra few seconds before looking away transforms a gesture of support into a hostile act: it becomes a "hate stare" of the sort practiced against Blacks in America's deep South in the 1950s (Goffman, 1963: 83).

By scratching at the surface of many of our day-to-day routines, Goffman uncovered a machinery of social interaction. However, it would be wrong to use this metaphor to suggest that we are just inanimate cogs; or to put the matter in a more contemporary idiom, just hardware for interactional programs that churn out a predictable and generally safe social world. On the contrary, Goffman was fascinated by our reflexive ability to manipulate these procedures for social interaction. Even if we often choose to live on autopilot, casually allowing the predictable

flow of social interaction to guide us through a host of encounters, we are able to switch to manual control in order to establish our autonomy. For example, we are generally unaware of how we are sitting; nevertheless, when circumstances demand (perhaps an important interview), we are able to spend a great deal of time worrying about whether we are sitting in an appropriate way. Goffman was very alert to such occasions; in his expression, he remained “lovingly empirical”. He made the mundane world refreshingly new. Unlike the traditional anthropologist who broadens our horizons by expanding our knowledge of other societies, Goffman shows us the complexity of our own.

Although there are divergences and shifting points of emphasis, it is true to say that Goffman’s corpus remained focused on the study of the minutiae of social life. Unlike so many great figures in the Arts and Social Sciences, such as Marx, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger, there is not a great discrepancy between Goffman’s early and late work. Instead we find continued attempts to analyze everyday phenomena and a curious willingness to abandon apparently apt ideas or “tools”.

Unsurprisingly, his writings have had a profound influence on most of the social sciences, but what is surprising is that the initial excitement is often short-lived. In part, this is one of the paradoxes of success: his ideas seem so well known, his books so well read, that it is redundant to comment on them. Goffman has become an overfamiliar landmark on the intellectual map of modern social science, a person who is cited everywhere but rarely discussed in detail. Nearly all social scientists can say something about “total institutions” and the “art of impression management” but few are able to give a comprehensive account of his ideas. At best, social scientists discuss the fragment of his work that bears substantively on their own interests. This may explain why there is no “Goffman School” to continue his work.

A SUMMARY OF GOFFMAN'S IDEAS

In his Master's thesis at Chicago, submitted in 1949, there is a protracted and ultimately vain attempt to use statistics to understand an audience's responses to a then popular American radio soap opera called "Big Sister". This work is quite unlike his later studies: it is dry, almost unauthored, and his only statistically based project. A couple of years later, in a study for the American Petroleum Institute, he studied the aspirations and frustrations of service-station dealers (people who either owned or leased petrol stations). For this, he used both quantitative and qualitative data, thereby bridging his earlier methodology with his developing interest in ethnography.

Prior to his dissertation, Goffman also published two papers, the first concerning the ways in which status symbols can be "borrowed" by those without the means to obtain them legitimately, the second about the extent to which everyday life is experienced as a huge confidence trick, in which we are all "marks" needing to be "cooled out". These two papers are a drastic departure from the quantitative approach of his Master's thesis, and the first signs of his distinctive writing style.

For his dissertation, which he was awarded at the end of 1953, Goffman spent eighteen months on a small island off the Scottish coast, studying face-to-face interaction in a crofting community. Alleging to be an American (he was to the end a Canadian) interested in agricultural techniques, Goffman studied the ways in which the islanders disclosed and hid information from each other. Working as a part-time assistant washer-up, he observed their everyday rituals and practices close up. With only 300 families on a small, flat island with almost no vegetation to partition the landscape, the crofters lived in almost continual sight of one another, and they became for Goffman a microcosm of society. With an elaborate set of definitions, classifications, and examples, he developed his field notes into a general

account of face-to-face interaction. In contrast to the dry text of his Master's thesis, this work contains extended metaphors and sharp touches. Goffman returned to these ideas frequently in the ensuing years.

In 1956 the University of Edinburgh published his first book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which discussed a number of "dramaturgical principles". Each of these principles explores the social world as if it were a theatrical performance. The social world becomes filled with "impression management" and team performances, as each of us is transformed into a cynical role player who hides behind an array of performance masks. This image sharpens one contained both in parts of his doctoral thesis and in his earlier paper on the ways in which life is experienced as a confidence trick. Three years later, in 1959, *The Presentation of Self* was reissued by Penguin Press in Great Britain and by Anchor in the States. What had begun life as a relatively obscure research monograph was destined to become a bestseller. There are several changes to the second edition, which superficially appear only to amplify the initial themes. However, on closer inspection they have a corrosive quality, and ultimately undermine the coherence of the view that we are all cynical actors performing instrumentally for personal gain. Retrospectively, these appended passages to the second edition mark a subtle but important change in Goffman's ideas.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, Goffman pursued three interdependent projects, all involving the interpretation of everyday behavior. First, he produced work that appears to fall squarely into the sociology of deviance. In 1961, his extraordinary ethnography, *Asylums*, was published. This analyzes the experiences of inmates in a Washington mental institution, and by extension, in any institution in which the time and space of subordinates are carefully monitored and restricted. He called these places "total institutions", and his discussion of them helps us to understand the apparently irrational behavior of those who are held there. The four essays that make up this book combine

extensive field observations with a dense knowledge of the scientific and popular literature. The result is an ethnography that is less a study of a specific hospital and more an ethnography of the concept of the total institution itself.

Goffman's second contribution to the sociology of deviance was called *Stigma* (1964a). Beginning with a poignant story of the hardships faced by a girl born without a nose, this book suggests that we are all stigmatized in some way: we are too fat, too short, we are losing our hair, we have failed in some activity in which we have invested a degree of self worth, etc. As a result, we have all learned to manage discrediting information about ourselves.

His second major project of the 1960s parallels his earlier work on the theatrical metaphor, only on this occasion he considered the social world not as theater but as a game. In *Encounters* (1961b) and *Strategic Interaction* (1970), he discusses everyday meetings as interactional "moves" enacted by players. This work leads Goffman to the edges of game and rational-choice theory; indeed, some of this work dates from his year spent with Thomas Schelling at Harvard. With characteristic imagination, Goffman draws upon an unusual source – true and fictional espionage stories – as a way of challenging our sense of what the mundane world is like. In this vein, he tells us that although to us a wrong number may be only a minor disruption to our day, to a spy it may cause anxiety and fear of disclosure. Our security in the fabric of the social world is not a natural feature of that world, but stems instead from a generally held set of rules of behavior. If we all lived our daily lives as spies, the social world would seem a frightening environment, where every meeting was a potential cause for fear. Of course, it is possible to see this erosion of trust in parts of cities such as New York. The key point is that we view these and similar locations as disturbing exceptions rather than as the norm. If the anxieties felt by many people in some parts of New York were typical of modern life, our experience of the social world would be radically different.

The third of Goffman's projects in the 1960s was the specification of the assumptions people use as they take part in social interaction. For most of us most of the time, the social world is predictable and routine. It is essential to see that this predictability is neither natural nor assured; instead it is an astonishing collective achievement to which we contribute daily in myriad ways. This means that the explanations of why, for example, kettles boil and cars stop at traffic lights must be quite separate. Goffman was quietly appalled by the number of methodologies that assume that people are comparable to inanimate objects. In the preface to *Relations in Public* (1971), for example, he suggests that sociologists who concentrate on hypothesis-testing are engaging in a type of "sympathetic magic" from which no knowledge of ordinary behavior can be gleaned. This type of research, he suggests, employs natural science analogs with only the hope that science will result (1971: 21).

Instead of viewing the predictability of social life as the consequence of underlying laws, Goffman thought that predictability was something that we all made happen; it is then, an issue of rule-following behavior. These rules of social interaction do not produce social order (they do not compel us to act); rather they are a way of exhibiting social order. Rules are subject to interpretation, to disagreement about what constitutes an occasion of rule-following, to exceptions, and to decisions not to abide by them. That the world is even in the slightest a predictable place is an extraordinary and largely invisible accomplishment.

Throughout the 1960s Goffman spent a considerable amount of time attempting to specify the broad assumptions people use in their everyday lives. By tracing a hesitant path through several of his books, it is possible to discern four basic assumptions, which I refer to as his SIAC schema. It is important to remember that Goffman did not use this acronym.

The first element of SIAC is "situational propriety". This suggests that the meaning of our actions is linked to the context in which they arose, and that we can rarely

understand behavior without knowledge of the situation in which it occurred. If I ask someone to marry me, the significance of this act means one thing in a church and another in a theater.

Buried in his account is a critique of the mainstream American psychiatric practice of the 1950s, which had, Goffman thought, replaced a physiological explanation of different mental illnesses with a non-medical classification of socially unacceptable behavior. Goffman thought that situational improprieties reveal the structural obligations of social interaction. They uncover mixed motives, sometimes pointing to absent-mindedness, sometimes to feelings of alienation, frustration, antagonism, resentment, social incompetence, and sometimes to mental illness. Behavior which appears to indicate “madness” can on other occasions be perfectly understandable. For example, when a woman fails to respond to the questions of a psychiatrist, her behavior seems to be symptomatic of an underlying mental disorder; yet when the same woman shows indifference to the hoots, calls, and invitations of male adolescents, her actions seem well motivated and perfectly sane (1967: 146–7).

Goffman made several stabs at analytically distinguishing different types of context, and the ensuing constraints accompanying each. In doing so, he separated “encounters”, in which there is a single focus of attention, from the “social occasions” in which they occur, and which are constrained by the event justifying their existence, such as a funeral or a New Year’s Eve celebration. Social occasions can in turn be distinguished from “social gatherings”, which are looser constellations of people, and “social situations”, which Goffman used as a catch-all category for moments when any type of interpersonal monitoring can occur, such as in elevators or lobbies. His success in determining the different types of context and the different constraints operating in them remains to be seen, but he was surely correct to claim that some types of contextual constraints structure our understanding of everyday behavior.

The second element of SIAC is “involvement”, which is our capacity to give, or to withhold from giving, concerted attention to the activity at hand (1963: 43). This idea originated in his doctorate, and, like much of his work, has a creeping effect: it begins as an innocuous observation but after a while it seems impossible to understand social life without it. In everyday interaction we are under pressure not simply to be involved in what’s going on, but to be appropriately involved in the situation. For every encounter there is a degree of involvement which meets social demands and expectations. Daily activities correspond to an “involvement contour” of greater and lesser involvement, as when we move from a conversational encounter with an acquaintance to verbal exchanges in an important meeting. Failure to display the requisite response to a situation is likely to be sanctioned, and so we typically “shield” our actual level of involvement if it is inappropriate. For example, newspapers disguise our attentive eavesdropping of a nearby conversation. However flimsy the importance of involvement appears to be, it underwrites our general feeling that social world is a reliable and predictable place (Goffman, 1961a: 72).

The third and fourth elements of SIAC are “accessibility” and “civil inattention” and they are two sides of the same coin, since both concern the problem of participant ratification. In everyday life we allow ourselves to be accessible to all friends and “ratified” strangers, although exactly what it is that distinguishes ratified from unratified strangers is difficult to specify. We have the right to expect and a duty to give a host of minor courtesies to people – these include telling the time, giving directions or a match, etc. These keep us as members of a common social world which is more than just an aggregate of people. Our sensitivity to levels of interpersonal access is extraordinary: we reflexively monitor our surroundings, distinguishing friends, acquaintances, and strangers at some distance, often while managing hectic pedestrian traffic and a con-

versation. In fact, to ease pedestrian flow we usually all conspire to limit exchanges between friends to a brief moment. Thus, when walking down a street we will often see a friend in the distance; we then pretend not to have seen him or her until a moment before passing by – at which time the second of mutual accessibility can be filled with a smile and eye contact. By this deception we perform a ritual honor that both accommodates a busy schedule and avoids encounters in which appropriate involvement is difficult to sustain.

“Civil inattention” is the flip side of this: it involves both a willingness to be seen (hence it is a tacit statement that no aggression is intended) and a sign of deference to those present. Goffman’s standard example of this is behavior in elevators. People struggle to avoid eye contact: they stare at their feet or the floor numbers as they ascend in what suddenly becomes a fascinating visual display. Civil inattention is the respect we owe to, and expect from, strangers. It is most poignantly brought to light in situations where it is withheld, as when a woman in a wheelchair enters a bar, orders a drink, and is met by a room of staring faces (this is a palimpsest of the B movie Western scene in which the piano player stops playing when the bad guy walks in).

From the 1970s until his death in 1982, Goffman worked on two further aspects of ordinary behavior. The first is a detailed exploration of how contexts structure our perceptions of the social world. Using an elaborate vocabulary to suggest that social life is “framed” in ways which specify the meaning of social situations, Goffman was able to identify how we routinely and effortlessly distinguish overall frames from frames-within-frames. If we were not able to distinguish the relationship between frames, we would be unable to interpret most everyday behavior. This is because we frequently “jump” from one frame to another, doing so in ways which are somehow identifiable and meaningful. For example, actors in commercials are sometimes scripted to remain on set to enjoy the products they