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## REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

*Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, by ERVING GOFFMAN. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974. 586 pp. \$12.50 cloth.

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Goffman has devoted most of his work to undermining the integrity of some accepted social entities (like the individual) and the legitimacy of others (like the total institution). *Frame Analysis* is no exception, except in this book Goffman attempts to undermine everyday reality itself, particularly James' and Schutz' claim that it is the prime reality, more fundamental than other realities (like dreams or play). (One wonders what Goffman will subtly subvert next. Watch out, God!)

Goffman begins by dividing the world into an empirical part—a "strip"—which he defines as "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity" (p. 10), and a subjective part—a "frame"—which he defines as the "principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (p. 10-11). (In his later, concrete applications of frame analysis, however, he is sometimes unclear whether frames organize the individual experience of events, as he claims (p. 13), or whether they determine the actual social organization of the events themselves.) We "frame" "strips" of activity by seeing them as natural ("unguided events") or social ("guided doings")—the two fundamental frames; or as fantasied or faked—two of the many instances of secondary frames Goffman discusses.

Frame analysis seems to have two aspects, which I will call the *cellular* and the *concentric*. The *cellular* aspect of frame analysis involves describing the membrane around an activity—the spatial and temporal brackets of each particular frame. For instance, the theater frame (which Goffman analyzes in greater detail than other frames) usually has a sharp beginning and ending as well as a highly defined spatial location. Cellular frame analysis also involves distinguishing the nucleus of an activity from its surrounding cytoplasm—the inner official events (the play itself) from

the outer spectacular occasion (going to the theater). One of Goffman's most incisive conceptual scalpels dissects framed strips of activity into "tracks" or "channels"—a "main" or "story" line at the center of the frame and several subordinate lines "out of frame" (disattended, directional, overlaid, and concealed lines).

The *concentric* (onion skin) aspect of frame analysis involves discriminating the various levels or "laminations" that frame a strip of activity and specifying the ways natural and social frames (basic) are transformed into other, less fundamental frames. One kind of frame transformation Goffman calls "keying," which he defines as "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (p. 43-44). We key a strip of activity by making it into a movie, novel, radio drama, theatrical play, cartoon, puppet show, etc. A second kind of frame transformation Goffman calls "fabrication," which he defines as "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is actually going on" (p. 83). We fabricate "benign" frames by indulging in leg-pulls, practical jokes, psychology experiments, etc.; we fabricate "exploitative" frames by engaging in espionage, con games, frame-ups, etc. Keyed frames, in which all parties are aware of the transformation, differ from fabricated frames, in which some parties are not aware of the transformation.

Since laminated frames are blown up out of fundamental frames ("upkeying"), they are more vulnerable to deflation ("downkeying"). Keyed frames are liable to fall when they are based on ambiguity (someone is not certain which frame to apply), error (someone thought a bank was being robbed but it was only a filming of a bank robbery), or dispute (the police contend someone dies of a heart attack—a natural frame—but the detective contends he was murdered—a social frame). Fabricated frames are liable to fall when the deceived discover that the frame they thought organized their activity naturally

was actually manufactured by the deceivers artificially (someone finds out he was conned out of his money). Since fabricated frames are based on a differential distribution of knowledge, they are more likely to break down and are more discrediting of their sustainers than keyed frames.

A collapsing frame has several consequences. The collapse of the meaning of the frame may leave everyone disoriented. The collapse of involvement in the frame may leave everyone either uninvolved (like a bored audience at a bad play) or intensely involved with whoever or whatever destroyed the frame and with their own lack of involvement and meaning. The latter, Goffman calls "negative experience—negative in the sense that it takes its character from what it is not. . ." (p. 379). (In Goffman's model, negative experience seems to be to normal experience as role distance is to role: the individual can define both his experience and his self in terms of what they are not.)

Given the often greater intensity of experience when it is negative, some people—particularly entertainers—deliberately manipulate the deflation of frames to create this intense, though negative, experience. Pirandello intentionally disorients his audience by continually collapsing their theater frame (some of his characters discuss their own acting or play at being members of the audience). Many staged sports contests, like televised wrestling or roller derby, intentionally involve their audience by continually collapsing the game frame (some of the contestants violate the rules outside of the referee's purview of control), causing their audience to become attentive less to the ruled actions than to the infractions. Other people—particularly terrorists and counter-terrorists—deliberately manipulate the deflation of frames for the more practical end of political disorientation. Letter bombs (which destroy frame brackets as well as people) undermine the safety of the postal system, treason in high places undermines faith in the government, agent provocateurs (by advocating extreme unlawful activity) undermine the legitimacy of revolutionary groups.

Before finishing with his main concern—the nature of everyday reality—Goffman returns to the topic that has preoccupied him since *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*: the notion that we are all actors. In fact, Goffman's secondary purpose in writing *Frame Analysis* seems to be to expand on his "dramaturgical perspective" and to answer some of the objections others have made to

ambiguities in his earlier work, particularly whether the dramaturgical perspective reveals that people spend most of their lives actually "acting" or whether it merely provides a vocabulary borrowed from theater with which to describe unstaged aspects of life. Goffman now asserts the former with more confidence and in more detail. He shows how much of our talking consists of *dramatizing* events that have happened to us. At these points, at least, talk is similar to theater. In dramatizing these events, we do to ourselves what the playwright does to his characters and the director does to his actors: withhold information to generate suspense, rehearse and replay, and even split ourselves into several parts (e.g., through irony or mocking) to reduce the responsibility of our present selves for what our past selves did or what our future selves would like to do—all this to gain audience appreciation for ourselves and sympathy for our predicaments:

. . . what the individual spends most of his spoken moments doing is providing evidence for the fairness or unfairness of his current situation and other grounds for sympathy, approval, exoneration, understanding, or amusement. And what his listeners are primarily obliged to do is to show some kind of audience appreciation. They are to be stirred not to take action but to exhibit signs that they have been stirred.

For what a speaker does usually is to present for his listeners a version of what happened to him. . . . Even if his purpose is to present the cold facts as he sees them, the means he employs may be intrinsically theatrical, not because he necessarily exaggerates or follows a script, but because he may have to engage in something that is a dramatization—the use of such arts as he possesses to reproduce a scene, to *replay* it. He runs off a tape of a past experience (p. 503–504).

But whereas life is much like the stage, the stage is not much like life. For in their everyday lives people do not speak nearly as well as characters on the stage, and the events they encounter are much more likely to be irrelevant and unconnected and much less likely to be critical and fateful (p. 557).

Goffman's assertion that much of human life consists of dramatizing brings us to the most eerie of his central themes—the disintegration of the individual. Throughout his works, Goffman deepens the sociological enterprise; he is not content with the ordinary sociological excavation of the individual which finds only roles to be social, with the "true" self hidden beneath them. Goffman is much more "radical" than that. He be-

