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Erving Goffman as Sorcerer's Apprentice A Reappraisal of the Schelling-Goffman Relationship

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Abstract

Thomas Schelling and Erving Goffman: who influenced whom, when and to what effect? Was there “influence” at all or, as Tom Burns suggests, independent discovery and convergence? These are the questions that this paper is meant to answer. Using available archival material and historical and textual analysis, the paper takes a fresh look at Goffman’s interest in and contribution to game theory. It charts the important first meeting in the late 1950s, their subsequent dialogue through publications, and the critical 1964 conference on “Strategic Interaction and Conflict,” where Goffman encountered an assembly of defense and nuclear strategists associated with the RAND Corporation. These include Daniel Ellsberg, who was a sharp critic of Goffman’s conference presentation, Albert Wohlstetter and, of course, Tom Schelling. During the heated discussion that accompanied Goffman’s presentation, the session chairman gave Goffman the sobriquet sorcerer’s “apprentice.” Ever the ally, Schelling said that he was sympathetic to Goffman’s “style of

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Introduction

The intellectual connection between Thomas C. Schelling, the economist and strategist, and Erving Goffman, the sociologist, is something of a mystery, the result of a lack of robust archival records pertaining to their relationship. The situation is not unlike the one discovered by the present author (Jaworski 2000) during an examination of the relation of Goffman to Everett C. Hughes, his early University of Chicago mentor. In that case,

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the literature exhibited a fragmented and inadequate record of the important relationship between mentor and student. An examination of then-available archives uncovered both essential correspondence and unpublished drafts of papers that pointed to a unique relationship: Goffman's "reluctant apprenticeship" to his early mentor. A similar situation holds for the Schelling–Goffman relationship. Here too, a paucity of archival and other records has led to a literature that reveals inconsistent and inadequate positions.

Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015), who represent a widely-held view, greatly overstate the case when they write that Goffman was "influenced by the works of the game theoretician Thomas Schelling, *with whom he spent a sabbatical year cultivating and integrating game-theory elements in his microsociological perspective*" (Jacobsen and Kristiansen 2015: 73 emphasis added). When preparing their study, the authors had insufficient evidence available to them; they did not have access to a statement, published online in the same year as their book, in which Schelling (2015) set the record straight. Goffman had indeed accepted Schelling's invitation to become a Fellow at Harvard's Center for International Affairs in the academic year 1966–1967. But the implication that they spent the year *together* (other than that they were both at Harvard) is not borne out by Schelling's recollections. In this online statement, Schelling says of Goffman that "we didn't become close friends. He was very distant." Further detail is given in a later letter written to Goffman biographer Yves Winkin. There Schelling affirms that during Goffman's fellowship at Harvard, "he spent the time writing. He probably participated in a few seminars, but mostly he kept to himself" (Schelling 1991).¹

Schelling's recollections suggest a different assessment of his relation to Goffman. This view holds that Goffman impressed and inspired Schelling when they met, at Goffman's initiative, in the late 1950s (probably 1956 or 1957) in Washington, DC. Goffman gave Schelling reprints of his articles on "On Face-Work" (Goffman 1955) and "Cooling the Mark Out" (Goffman 1952). At that time, and subsequently, they developed a mutual intellectual admiration and meeting of the minds. Published confirmation of this esteem is found in Schelling's *The Strategy of Conflict* (1980 [1960]), which includes unusually laudatory references to Goffman. These references are found in that book's Chapter Five, titled, "Enforcement, Communication and Strategic Moves," and also in a version of that chapter published two years earlier (Schelling 1958b). There Schelling named Goffman's paper "On Face-Work" a "brilliant study in the relation of game theory to gamesmanship and a pioneering illustration of the rich game-theoretic content of formalized behavior structures like etiquette, chivalry, diplomatic practice, and – by implication – the law (Schelling 1980 [1960]: 128n8). But there is more. All told, Schelling included three footnote citations to Goffman's work,² more than he gave to any other author in that chapter, including von Neumann and Morgenstern (2 citations) and Luce and Raifa (2 citations). It is not too much to contemplate that this Chapter Five was Schelling's written response to the conversations he had had with Goffman during their first meeting in Washington, DC.

Tom Burns, Goffman's friend and most thoughtful and thorough critic, presents an alternative point of view on this question. Burns suggests that rather than indicating a matter of influence, the parallels in Schelling's and Goffman's work were arrived at independently and that "both of them had for some time recognized those parallels,

¹ The author is most grateful to Dr. Winkin for sharing this letter (Schelling 1991).

² See Schelling (1980 [1960]: 115-16n20, 128n8, and 149n22).

even convergence, in the way their ideas were developing” (Burns 1992: 63). In this view, the first meeting in Washington, DC, and subsequent exchange of ideas via publication, further developed this convergence.

The 1964 Conference on “Strategic Interaction and Conflict”.

The deep connection between Goffman and Schelling on the analytical concepts of “communication” and “enforcement” within game theory is documented in the published transactions of the three-day 1964 Conference on “Strategic Interaction and Conflict,” held under the auspices of the Institute of International Studies of the University of California, Berkeley, then directed by sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset. Goffman, who was then teaching at Berkeley, was a member of the 1964 conference Planning Committee and he attended and actively participated in discussions during the three days. Even the conference title bears his mark; Goffman had coined the term “strategic interaction.” Held off campus near the Russian River in California, the conference assembled leading and emerging figures in strategic and conflict studies. As will be shown, Goffman used the occasion to advance his own views on the topics of enforcement, communication and strategic moves. His views took final, published form in the eponymous second chapter of his *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman 1969). Whatever else they were, these documents – Chapter Five of Schelling’s *The Strategy of Conflict*, Goffman’s contribution to the 1964 conference, and his book *Strategic Interaction* – provide a public record of the dialogue that Schelling and Goffman were having with each other.

As background to this discussion of the conference, it is instructive to review the players. Here are some of the main characters:

Like Goffman, **Kathleen Archibald** was a Canadian and was one of the organizers of the conference, this in her capacity as coordinator in Lipset’s Institute at UC, Berkeley; and she edited the transactions of the conference (Archibald 1966). In her “Introduction” to the conference proceedings, Archibald wrote, “In using Erving Goffman’s term ‘strategic interaction’ as a label for the conference, we hoped to designate a particular network of concepts of interest to several disciplines.” Further, she wrote “[w]e wished to focus on, in Schelling’s terms, mixed-motive games, or in more traditional parlance, on non-zero-sum games” (p. v). Thus described, the conference was intended for a broad spectrum of social scientists and not only for the traditional and technical game theorists in mathematics and economics – though some of these attended as well. Soon after the conference, Archibald took her Ph.D. in sociology at Washington University in St. Louis (Archibald 1968) and would serve for years as a staffer at RAND and in various capacities at several American and Canadian universities. In his *Strategic Interaction*, Goffman (1969: 3) acknowledges Archibald’s helpful comments on a draft of the book’s first chapter and says he “incorporated [those comments] freely into the text without acknowledgement.”

Frederick Balderston hailed from a Quaker family and was a conscientious objector during World War II, where he served as a volunteer American Field Service ambulance driver and lieutenant attached to the British Army. He earned his Ph.D. in Economics at Princeton University in 1953, the same year that Goffman took

his doctorate at the University of Chicago. A professor at the University of California, Berkeley at the time of the conference, Balderston served as chairman of the session in which Goffman led the discussion.

Alex Bavelas was an experimental psychologist at Stanford University whose work on the effects of communication patterns on group stability was important to Schelling's own solution to the stability problem (Bavelas 1953; Ayson 2004: 174–175).

Before she became a leading feminist sociologist (see Bannister 1991), **Jessie Bernard** was making her mark as a conflict theorist and advocate of game-theoretic approaches in sociology (e.g. Bernard 1954).³ Of all the conference participants, she was perhaps closest to Goffman in her theoretical bearings, as she rooted her views on conflict in the works of Robert E. Park, with whom she had studied in the 1920s (Bannister 1991: 127). Where Bernard diverged from Goffman was in her enthusiasm for a version of game theory in the social sciences that featured mathematical game-theoretic solutions. Bernard was an active participant in the sessions as discussant. She and Kathleen Archibald were the only women on the conference roster.

Morton Deutsch was a Columbia University social psychologist whose books, including *Preventing World War III* (1962) and *The Resolution of Conflict* (1973), sealed his reputation as an expert on conflict resolution. This expertise became especially relevant when game theory expanded beyond the win-loss framework of its founders and was turned into a method of arriving at resolutions of conflict. A WW II veteran, he served in the Army Air Force and flew 30 missions as a navigator over Nazi-occupied Europe (Roberts 2017). In the late 1950s, Schelling and Deutsch each made Swiftian “modest proposals” on how to reduce the “reciprocal fear of surprise [nuclear] attack.” Schelling proposed that the U.S. and Soviets exchange kindergarten children (Schelling 1958a; Schelling 1980 [1960]: 136) and Deutsch proposed that American government leaders send their offspring (along with others) to the Soviets, and that they do the same in turn with the U.S., in a cultural exchange program (Wright et al. 1962: 83–86). Knowing that an attack on one's enemy was also an attack on one's kin and countrymen would greatly reduce the likelihood of surprise attack. Neither proposal was implemented.

By the time of the conference in 1964, **Daniel Ellsberg** had already served as a Marine platoon leader, a RAND strategic analyst, and a member of the State Department under Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara. He was thirty-three years old and a man of the establishment. His years with the government, however, included time learning discomfiting realities about not only the Vietnam War but also the command and control of America's nuclear weapons (Ellsberg 2017). To whom could he disclose these distressing details and how? Only a handful of years after the conference, Ellsberg began copying every document in his Top Secret safe at RAND, including seven thousand pages of a study on official decisions made during the Vietnam War. He would leak those pages,

³ In his survey of sociology and game theory, Richard Swedberg (2001: 315) identifies Jessie Bernard as a “pioneer” in the field and Goffman as someone who had offered “scattered but lively discussions” of game theory in his works.

which came to be known as the *Pentagon Papers*, thereby becoming the most famous whistleblower of the era. Ellsberg was a key discussant, and critic, of Goffman's contribution to the conference.

William Gamson, the noted political sociologist and author of *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Gamson 1975; see also Gamson 1961) attended the conference and set down his recollections in a wide-ranging interview with Dimitri Shalin (Gamson 2009). "There were about 20 people on the panel," Gamson recalls, "sitting around the table, making presentations, responding." With all that power in the room, it was an intimidating conference. Still, Gamson remembers Goffman's "fearlessness" and one-upmanship during the meeting, taking on the likes of Albert Wohlstetter. "He took on the RAND Corporation people," Gamson reported, "and was challenging them." While he didn't favor Goffman's readiness to employ *ad hominem* critiques, Gamson affirms that Goffman was "challenging people who ought to have been challenged."

The great Hungarian-born American economist and game theorist, **John C. Harsanyi** attended the conference. He was then teaching at the University of California, Berkeley after a biopic-worthy personal journey from Budapest to Austria to Australia and finally to the United States. Like Schelling, he would win the Nobel Prize (1994) in Economics. Harsanyi shared his Nobel Prize with John Nash and his co-author Reinhardt Selten, all of whom made important contributions to the problem of equilibrium in noncooperative games.

A mathematical psychologist, **Anatol Rapoport** published *Fights, Games and Debates* (Rapoport 1960) and with it a reformulation of game theory that moved beyond the views of von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944). In place of their assumption of rationality and emphasis on noncooperative zero-sum solutions, Rapoport introduced ethical positions such as the "assumption of similarity" and "assurance of understanding." A pacifist and socialist in political convictions, he nevertheless worked on research for RAND and on U.S. Air Force contracts through his association with the Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Michigan (Erickson 2015: 176-180).

Martin Shubik was a Yale economist and game theorist who studied with Oskar Morgenstern at Princeton University (where he took a Ph.D. in 1953) and with von Neumann, who was at the Institute for Advanced Study, also located in Princeton, NJ. Shubik famously resided in the same dormitory suite as John Nash and Lloyd Shapley. Like so many of the other conference participants, Shubik was a RAND consultant who employed game theory to answer questions of military and defense strategy.

One of the original nuclear strategists at RAND, **Albert Wohlstetter** was largely responsible for sweeping away the Eisenhower-era views on nuclear deterrence, such as the principle of "massive retaliation," and clearing the way for the emerging doctrines of "limited war" and "second strike" capabilities (Kaplan 1983: Ch. 6). For these contributions, a year after the conference, he received the Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service from Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the first of two times he would receive this honor. Wohlstetter was one of the RAND Corporation people that William Gamson recalls Goffman challenging at the conference.

Goffman as Sorcerer's Apprentice

While Goffman may have been fearless, as Gamson recalls, he was also vulnerable. His own contribution to the conference produced a pointed discussion and appears to have been cut short. This debate was not during the main part of the conference, which consisted of a series of invited and original papers by select figures – such as Deutsch, Harsanyi, Rapoport and Schelling – along with general discussion of those papers. Rather, Goffman's central contribution was in the second part of the conference where speakers introduced pre-selected topics followed by an open discussion of those topics. The five discussion topics included such areas as “The Concept of Rationality” (introduced by Harsanyi) and “The Vocabulary of Basic Moves” (introduced by Schelling).⁴ Goffman introduced the discussion of “Communication and Enforcement Systems” in the conference's fifth and final session. The four other introductions were brief and went forward without incident. Indeed, Schelling admitted during his introduction to the topic of “The Vocabulary of Basic Moves” that “I haven't prepared anything” (Archibald 1966: 157). In contrast, Goffman prepared what amounted to a full paper, and session chairman Balderston in his introductory remarks did not fail to mention this fact: “Erving Goffman is going to talk about communication and enforcement systems. His comments will be more extensive than our other introductions – he almost has a paper,” Balderston remarked (198). Thus, at the very beginning of the session Goffman was introduced as a person who had skirted the conference rules. Balderston was a year younger than Goffman, but he took his chairmanship duties very seriously.

Goffman began his presentation by stating that his interest in “strategic interaction” was based on the opportunity it provided to gain “analytical coherence” in different fields of study, especially those fields pertaining to the study of interaction and communication. He identified Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess as the founding figures of these topics in sociology. Their textbook *Introduction to the Science of Society* (Park and Burgess 1969 [1921]) introduced generations of students to the study of interaction and communication. Goffman implies in his presentation that there had been, over the years, something of a conceptual muddle around these terms. For Goffman, game theory, and especially Schelling's version of it, provided an opportunity to further clarify these concepts.

Continuing his talk, Goffman identified four sub-areas in sociology involving communication. These were all areas Goffman had been working in since his graduate school years. The first is the study of gatherings or ongoing and face-to-face interaction. Goffman maintains that in this area of study the examination of communication is secondary to an interest in examining the moral order of a society. The second area is the study of “intelligence systems.” This sub-area Goffman discusses in the most general terms and appears to have been a research subject to which he anticipated contributing. An example would be his analysis of “Expression Games” in *Strategic Interaction* and the pages there discussing the rationalization of intelligence agencies. Third is the study of “interpersonal activity,” which examines the structural factors that govern the motivations of individuals. This area Goffman says is closest to game theory

⁴ For a discussion of the conversation that took place during the session on “The Concept of Rationality,” see (Erickson et al. 2013: 16–26).

and includes the study of relationships, “face,” and “ritual equilibrium” – all topics that were analyzed in Goffman’s 1955 publication “On Face-Work,” an offprint of which Goffman shared with Schelling when they first met in Washington, DC. The fourth area of study that involves communication, Goffman says, “I propose to ‘dub’ ‘strategic interaction.’” Goffman viewed strategic interaction within the context of communication because it helped to distinguish it analytically from the other three sub-areas of study (200).

Among the many analytical features of strategic interaction that Goffman discussed during his presentation, one passed unremarked by his fellow conferees and another generated considerable controversy.

For Goffman, a key feature of “strategic interaction” was the interdependence of fate of the players. While an organic system is characterized by the interdependence of species, and the market system involves an interdependence of supply and demand, the system of strategic interaction is characterized by what Goffman called “massive interdependence.”⁵ “One’s whole situation can be radically transformed by the action of the other,” he said (200). With the Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 not long past, this element of Goffman’s vision of the world was noncontroversial and passed unremarked. The very ordinariness of this idea underscores, perhaps, a common feature of the worldview of all the conference participants: a sense of existential vulnerability.

Where Goffman ran into controversy was in his attempted elucidation of the differences among words, deeds, and strategic moves. This part of the presentation was more pedantic than profound. *A move is neither action nor communication*, Goffman asserted. *A faked move is not communication*, he added. *Weighted words constitute a move but are not yet communication in my sense*, he continued. For the defense intellectuals in the room, these and other similar pronouncements were tantamount to a discussion about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. In stark contrast to the fatefulness of the world he portrayed, Goffman was debating matters of questionable practical value and that held little or no apparent intellectual consequence.

In the event, disagreements started with Ellsberg and continued with many others in the room, including Bavelas, Deutsch, Harsanyi and Shubik. Goffman continued against all arguments. In his interaction with his fellow conference participants, and in the theoretical position he advocated during his remarks, Goffman was taking the stance of a noncooperative game theorist. Indeed, he proposed that analysts should begin “with pure strategy between implacable, ungovernable, dishonest enemies, and work back...” (212). Ellsberg asked simply – why? – and he questioned the implications of Goffman’s position (209–10):

Ellsberg: “[Your language]...seems to me to be destroying—or discouraging one from making—very important analogies, which are really functional equivalents between various kinds of activities.”

Goffman: “Give me an example?”

⁵ Goffman’s phrase “massive interdependence” offered an unfortunate echo of John Foster Dulles’s principle of “massive retaliation,” a cornerstone of the Eisenhower-era nuclear strategy that had been rejected by the defense intellectuals attending the 1964 conference. In *Strategic Interaction*, Goffman (1969: 136) changes the phrase to “full interdependence.”

Ellsberg: “Yes. It seems as though you are looking only at pure conflict situations in which one party has no prior reason to imagine that the other one has any reason to be truthful or informative. You seem to be ignoring the possibility, even in a conflict situation, of a desire for coordination, for truth-telling... [After more back and forth, Ellsberg continued...]. “Focussing attention on possibilities or even alerting—for example the words ‘Look out!’ by an unknown speaker in your vicinity are a signal to ready yourself to begin looking out. More specifically, “Look over there!” Just turn your eyes from here to there and see what you can see. A lion, isn’t it?”

Goffman: “But this is the classic theme in western stories. The person who wants to take a shot at you says, “Look, there’s something behind you.”

Ellsberg: “But you’re not always at high noon on the street of a western town.”

Finally, even session chairman Balderston expressed exasperation: he gave Goffman the sobriquet sorcerer’s “apprentice” and requested that sorcerer Schelling “straighten [him] out” (213). Ever the supporter, Schelling defended Goffman saying, “I am very sympathetic to Erv’s style of sorcery” (213). Nevertheless, the enforcement system of the conference – the privilege of the chairperson to direct the proceedings – worked as it was designed and just as Goffman theorized. Balderston asked Goffman to finish, a “move” that ended his presentation and initiated an informative and lively discussion.⁶

In the discussion that followed, the dialogue returned to the issues of communication, but unburdened by the pedantic distinctions Goffman was attempting to make. How is it best to optimize communication between opposing parties? What is the role of secrecy in strategic games? Is there such a thing as a “secret move”? A sense of this dialogue follows:

Schelling: If I know there’s a burglar downstairs, and I want to be sure I don’t get in a gun fight, I may, or my wife may tell me to, throw my gun out the window so the burglar won’t see any gun. That is not a strategic move designed to keep the burglar out or to let him in. It is designed to reduce the strategies available. But if I throw the gun downstairs or show him the gun in my hand, this is designed to influence him. Maybe we can distinguish things that don’t yet change the information state but eventually will. If I load my gun now, and later on he finds out it is loaded, that will influence him. But you don’t load a gun in a dark room to influence him, but because the act of loading changes the strategies available to you.

Goffman: What would you call those uncommunicated acts?

Schelling: Let’s call them acts that do not change the state of information. Maybe the word “communication” should be ruled out because people have strong desires about how to use it, but there is such a thing as...

Wohlstetter: Secret acts.

Goffman: But not secret moves.

⁶ Balderston’s precise words were, “Can we get Erving to make a magnificent peroration and then have a discussion (Archibald 1966: 208)?”

Schelling: There's a difference between an act that you deliberately make secret and one that is inherently secret.

Goffman: There can't be a secret move then?

Schelling: There cannot be a totally strategic move, as I've used the term, unless it is intended to be non-secret to somebody...

As this exchange reveals, Goffman remained an active participant in the discussion. But with his formal presentation ended, a question remains: Was there more in his prepared remarks than is found in the conference transactions? This we cannot know at present because a copy of the actual presentation is not available in any known archive. It is certain, however, that Goffman's conference presentation was an early version of the eponymous second chapter of his book *Strategic Interaction* (1969). Both the conference presentation and book engage game theory through the fictional character of "Harry," Goffman's hapless foil who faces lions, spears and enemy airplanes in a series of game-theoretic illustrations of "implacable" foes. Further, both the conference presentation and book expound on themes of interaction, communication and enforcement. Goffman clearly thought he was saying something important in these areas. In the "Preface" to *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman 1969: ix-x), for example, he situates his two essays as alternatives to prior efforts at elucidating the place of communication in face-to-face interaction. His fellow conference participants, however, would sharply disagree. Even Schelling, in the dialogue quoted above, proposed doing away with the word "communication," because of the heated debate that ensued around the meaning of that word.

Burns (1992: 59) was perhaps right when he wrote of *Strategic Interaction* that the last "twenty or thirty pages of the book" contained its most vital contribution. In those pages are found Goffman's ideas on enforcement and communication, ideas that go far beyond those presented at the 1964 conference.

Schelling and Goffman on Enforcement

The themes of communication and enforcement are central to Schelling's reorientation of game theory as presented in the essays that made up *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960). He sought to overcome the limitations of the pioneering book by von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944), whose work came to be associated with two-person noncooperative zero-sum games. In poker, chess and other games of strategy on a board and in life, there is a winner and loser. For Schelling, the complexity of cases he wished to deal with were not encompassed by that narrow framework. He was interested in nonzero-sum games involved in "wars and threats of war, strikes, negotiations, criminal deterrence, class war, race war, price war, and blackmail; maneuvering in a bureaucracy or in a traffic jam; and the coercion of one's own children" (Schelling 1980 [1960]: 83). He chose the term "mixed-motive games" to represent this wider area of cases where people are engaged in some mixture of both conflict and cooperation. Key "moves" in these games included "threats" and "promises," each a form of commitment to a particular course of action. But threats are not threats until they are communicated, and words are "mere words" unless they are backed up by some enforcement. Communication and enforcement, therefore, are necessary for credible commitments.

Schelling posits the analytical and real significance of “enforcement schemes,” social arrangements that provide some outside authority to enforce compliance and allow for the detection of noncompliance. For example, the effectiveness of nuclear arms control and disarmament hinges on the ability to apply effective enforcement agreements. But he admits a wide range of other arrangements that may serve the same function. For example, he concedes that “trust” is a possible basis for producing compliance between partners, but notes that it should not be taken for granted. Even in the absence of enforceable agreement, Schelling proposes, parties may create circumstances that produce jeopardy for noncompliance and thus increase the probability of conformity, thereby acting as a sort of enforcement “in effect.” As examples he cites tearing a treasure map in half, allowing one partner to carry the gun and the other ammunition, holding meetings in public where neither side can escape, and the taking and exchange of hostages (135). Here Schelling tenders his Swiftian “modest proposal” for how to ensure that the U.S. and Soviets, despite their mutual hatred and distrust, would not revert to a surprise nuclear attack: he suggests the two countries trade kindergarten children. While he ultimately decides that this proposal is unworkable, he notes that in many cases “a unilateral promise is better than none” (136).

It must be admitted that Schelling’s analysis of enforcement falls short. He recognizes the importance of the subject, but does not systematically analyze the types or functions of various enforcement schemes. Nor does he expound on the multiple meanings or kinds of enforcement. A measure of how much Schelling missed the mark is Ayson’s important study of Schelling’s ideas on “strategy as social science”: it has only one reference to enforcement in its index (Ayson 2004). This is the topic, however, that Goffman introduced at the 1964 conference on “Strategic Interaction and Conflict” and he presents a masterful discussion of enforcement in the final sections of *Strategic Interaction*.

At the 1964 conference, Goffman’s presentation tied the notion of enforcement to Schelling’s version of game theory and its concept of official “enforcement schemes.” Here is Goffman in a typical statement from the conference transactions: “I think a basic question that Schelling’s work poses for us is to ask why anybody should give any weight whatsoever to what anybody ever says – and the simplest answer is that an enforcement system transforms meaningless words into acts for which the system makes you responsible” (Archibald 1966: 203). One of the few examples he offers is that of raising one’s hand in an auction house, a setting that Goffman knew well. In *Strategic Interaction*, however, these tethers are removed. While the text still reveals an active engagement with Schelling’s ideas, enforcement is now viewed within a much broader scope. Indeed, the essay “Strategic Interaction” (Goffman 1969: 86–145) masterfully surveys the grand sweep of constraints on human social interaction. The essay moves along several dimensions – nature and culture, tight and loose games, external and internal enforcement – and results in a complex yet comprehensive statement on the moral order of mid-twentieth century American society.

In “Strategic Interaction,” Goffman’s analysis of enforcement begins with a discussion of nature as a source of constraint on human behavior (Goffman 1969: 89–91). Here Goffman takes off from classical game theory, which includes an analysis of “games against nature” (e.g., Milnor 1951), to point out that nature itself – a flood, a forest fire, a terminal diagnosis – may set the conditions and the options within which one must act. Even inaction before nature, Goffman reminds us, is in effect a move in a

game, as it represents a commitment to a course of action that will carry real life or death consequences (91). Such games Goffman calls “tight games” (119), as the constraints are strong and the consequences grave and often inescapable. Goffman’s view of nature is revealed in his word choice: he calls it “implacable nature,” in the sense that nature is determined and unsparing.

Society, however, loosens games. This is so even when enforcement is vested in a group of officials such as in Schelling’s “enforcement schemes.” While admitting that the guards and judges of social institutions administer a “socially organized system of sanctions” (116), Goffman nevertheless emphasizes the possibilities and multiple opportunities for misperception, cheating, bribery and influence – for the ways in which people subvert their enforcers. Opportunities abound for persons in lowly and lofty social positions. Imagine a U.S. President who signals to a long-standing enemy nation that he invites the enemy to steal information from and damage the claims of a political rival. Such a president could escape negative sanctions simply by claiming the words were just a joke. Goffman foresaw how an act of treason can be “re-keyed” into little more than a quip. Indeed, Goffman’s own writings prior to *Strategic Interaction* provide added weight to this claim. Those writings, from *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, to *Stigma*, and *Asylums* all discuss way of “bypassing, subverting, or challenging the enforcement system” (118).

Games are loosened even more when not guards or judges but players themselves are in charge of enforcement within the context of broad compelling norms. Here is Goffman turning the analysis back to the interaction order: “From institutional settings, where specialized ready agencies can be called upon to give weight to words, we can turn to less formal situations, situations in which the participants themselves must provide the enforcement” (126). In contrast to Schelling, and indeed to his own presentation at the 1964 conference, Goffman now affirms the commonsense view that that “internalized standards constitute the chief enforcement system for communication in society” (136). Such standards render the person a “kind of moral commitment mechanism” (127). Here, Goffman addresses a wide range of cultural standards that impose a normative basis for conduct, standards such as trust, sportsmanship, fair play and, as Ellsberg reminded him, of truth-telling. These cultural standards provide a ground for constraint where the principle enforcer is the person himself.

A sociologist who was keenly aware of people’s secrets and lies, Goffman nevertheless understood the importance of truth-telling for social interaction. He contrasts the lay version of truth-telling with his own sociological view. In the lay version, people believe that if a person is addressing you while directly looking you in the eyes, that person is likely telling you the truth (127). A person’s eyes, in this view, provide a “window to a room that is lit from within by emotional expression” (128). While Goffman considered this belief “misguided,” he nevertheless understood it to be widespread. He relates a story about U.S. President Kennedy, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, believing Soviet Premier Khrushchev and his advisors because their expressive behavior was indicative that their statements were “self-believed” (127–128). In contrast to this lay view, Goffman’s sociological approach examines virtue within the context of community and society. “When members of a community are socialized into the use of speech,” Goffman writes, “they are also socialized into the importance of truth-telling and

being reputed as truth-tellers” (136). For Goffman, the significance of truth-telling lies not in looking within, into someone’s eyes, but without. Who will play, work, live, love or follow us if we cannot be relied on to give our word and keep it? Stated differently, who will give weight to our words? Truth as a virtue, in this sociological view, is based on “organizational necessity” (130) and with the end of truth-telling so goes social order.

But Goffman does not end his survey with the ways in which broad cultural norms provide internalized constraints on conduct. He continues with an examination of enforcement at the level of face-to-face interaction. Here Goffman discusses a different set of touchstones, including standards of taste, mutual respect, sympathy, and tact. His analysis shows that the behavioral constraints imposed by broad cultural standards are not simply additive to the “good manners” expected in polite informal face-to-face conversation; they may conflict with each other. For example, in formal settings truth-telling may be construed as a primary value, whereas in informal interaction tact not truth matters. Goffman makes these points in the most general way, but one could identify many examples:

“Face-to-face interaction is an arena of conduct...and conduct is judged first off not in regard to sincerity and candor, but ‘suitability’. Certain forms of prevarication and insincerity will certainly be offensive, but also there will be many situations where a sincere expression of feelings and a candid statement of opinions will be defined as quite unnecessary if not actually offensive. Other considerations will often dominate, such as a desire to show sympathy and tact, whatever else one is feeling” (134).

In summation: We live in a world of constraints, some natural and others social or human made. Though the constraints of nature may be rigid and unforgiving, social institutions and conventions “loosen” enforcement to permit a degree of relative freedom. People are ever-creative at devising means of escape from their judges and jailers. The constraints of the moral order place limits on those games. Cultural norms of “fair game” and truth-telling, for example, provide a kind of enforcement that people place on themselves, rules that form the ground of social order at the interactional level. Moreover, the etiquette of polite conversation instills additional conventions, different than broader cultural norms but no less compelling. In the end, there is also the constraint of simple utility – the chance of being discovered as noncompliant is sufficient to motivate falling in line.

Goffman does here for game theory what Durkheim in the *Division of Labor in Society* does for the utilitarian thinking of his day: he reveals the deep moral community underlying social interactions and he uncovers the non-game-like elements of games. While “enforcement schemes” are external and formal, standards of moral conduct provide a form of enforcement that is deeply hidden; they are internalized and enacted. Game theory may treat norms as a “regrettable limitation,” Goffman says, but for the sociologist, the normative limitations on pure gaming “may be a matter of chief interest” (114).

In this light, “Strategic Interaction” may be seen as Goffman’s private message to Schelling, and public declaration to all, that he was no sorcerers “apprentice.” Just as

Durkheim does for Spencer so Goffman does for Schelling. He presents a sociological critique of neo-rationalist thinking, as sociologist Randall Collins (1981: 219–254) has observed, and was standing up for himself and for his identity as a sociologist. Goffman theorized this notion of standing one's ground in "Strategic Interaction" when he wrote that a response to an offense may have nothing to do with strategy or self-interest, or even with successful enforcement; the "first need" of an offended party, Goffman writes, "may be to stand up and be counted" (134) – one's personal honor demands such a response. Through its expansive view of enforcement and its critical analysis of the limitations of game-theory in light of sociological wisdom, Goffman stood up as the formidable sociologist that he was.

Postscript

What Goffman thought about *Strategic Interaction* we do not know. The lack of access to Goffman's personal papers makes it impossible to answer this question. Was he pleased with the book? Was he happy to move on to other projects? Consider possessing a list of people to whom he sent a copy of the book and in what spirit he sent it? We do not have such a list.⁷ We do know, however, of one person to whom the book was sent: J. Edgar Hoover, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

The communication to and from Hoover was obtained by sociologist Mike Keen through a Freedom of Information Act request as part of the research for his book, *Stalking the Sociological Imagination: J. Edgar Hoover's FBI Surveillance of American Sociology* (Keen 1999). The results of his FOIA request are now available in the Special Collections Research Center of the University of Chicago Library. A path-breaking study, both through its methods (extensive research via FOIA) and content, Keen's book does not include a chapter on Goffman. This is because the results of the FOIA request on Goffman are exceedingly sparse. They do, however, include a letter from Marilyn Sale (1970), then editor at the University of Pennsylvania Press, which published Goffman's book. The letter, dated January 15, 1970, reads:

Dear Mr. Hoover,

We are sending to you, under separate cover, a copy of Erving Goffman's *Strategic Interaction*, which we will publish shortly, and which we believe might be of interest to you and your staff. In this book, Professor Goffman uses espionage and police literature to show how men elicit, cover, and reveal information in game-like interaction.

Yours sincerely,

Marilyn Sale

Editor

The January 23 response from Hoover's office reports, "I have not yet received this book but I am looking forward to doing so" (Hoover 1970). Further, the FBI's copy of

⁷ Goffman gave Robert Jervis a republication copy of *Strategic Interaction* and Jervis keeps it in his Columbia University office with his other books by Goffman directly across from his desk. The author thanks Professor Jervis for showing me this and other books in his personal library.

Hoover's return letter adds an internal FBI office note that states that the Bureau's files "reveal nothing identifiable regarding Miss Sale or Professor Goffman, based on information available." In other words, neither was on an FBI list of subversives. Nor was there information on file on the term "strategic interaction."

Had Goffman authorized this prepublication announcement to the FBI? Did he think that the analyses in *Strategic Interaction* carried practical significance for crime fighting? Or, was it a lark, a piece of Goffmanian mischief making, and a joke done for his and others' amusement? We may never know.

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