

A Tribute to Erving Goffman

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Erving Goffman died in his 60th year on November 20th, 1982 in Philadelphia. He was one of the very few sociologists whose work was known beyond the field—and his influence on the world, as well as within the disciplines of social science, has already been so great that he stands as a giant among the social thinkers of his day. His dazzling writing style enabled him to write clear English without jargon and with a nicety and a feeling for words extremely rare among academics—never cute or patronizing to the reader, but thoroughly professional. And his writing was enlivened by the enormous catholicity of materials that he drew upon, illustrative vignettes—vivid, horrifying, amusing, entrancing—not only scholarly and sociological, but from history, literature, and the annals of popular culture. A judicious assessment of his work remains for later reviews. But there is already no doubt that Goffman changed the way we think about the world we live in and our passage through it. He examined apparently insignificant, unnoticeable, conventional activities and found important social principles embedded in routine.

Erving Goffman was born in 1922 in Manville, Alberta. He earned his BA at the University of Toronto in 1945, and his Master's and doctor's degrees in sociology at the University of Chicago in 1949 and 1953. His dissertation, *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*, informed his first great work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. First published in 1956 by the University of Edinburgh Social Science Research Centre, this work became the much reprinted paperback that inspired so many undergraduates to enter sociology—and changed the shape of the field as well.

When one asks colleagues—and also people outside sociology—what they know of Erving Goffman, they mention this great, early work. They often mention the significance of concepts like backstage, to show the importance of the hidden, mediating work that must be accomplished for successful presentations in public. And they discuss the importance of dramaturgical imagery for understanding the constructed nature of human interaction. Some have deplored the treatment of impression management in this imagery as an overly cynical view of motivation for all behaviors. But the real significance of this rhetoric lies in its focus on showing the place of any behavior within a system of understandings developed about the appropriate context for the display of manners and morals, emotions and feelings.

For this and his many later works, sociologists honored Goffman in 1961 with the Malver Award and in 1981 with the presidency of the association. But these formal recognitions cannot

sufficiently express what a debt the field owes to Erving Goffman.

Goffman's work shows the significance of microanalysis for understanding the world we live in, the importance of each actor who moves through the everyday world in recreating and maintaining the normative order. It is Goffman who explains why macroanalysis, though it can show us the patterns of normative order, cannot tell us how it works. We need to observe the actors closely in order to understand how social structure is made viable. In the examination and analysis of social order, moment by moment, we can see how that order is constructed, how individuals take on themselves the responsibility for its maintenance and reconstitution after a rupture—through embarrassment, for example.

Goffman pulled apart commonly held assumptions and expectations that obscured social structure to show us its formerly invisible underpinnings. For instance, his discussion of taking cigarettes and matches away from mental patients showed how this restriction made it impossible for them to engage in the give and take of commonplace activity. And in his analysis of the propriety of maintaining role distance and guying the role of rider on the merry-go-round, he showed how impression management is a social rather than a personality issue.

Erving Goffman's fine-grained analyses, his sharply perceptive images and metaphors which then guide our own perceptions ever afterward, change the world for us. As Jessie Bernard once wrote: "We can never see the world the same way after reading Goffman; we will never forget his description of such phenomena as 'lollers' tuck"—how people lean up against walls when waiting for someone. It is this perceptiveness that served him well when he showed us how to look for the underlife of institutions and the processes of colonization and secondary adjustments possible there.

Goffman's ability to create powerful imagery has often been put to the service of the powerless. In early works like *Stigma* and *Asylums*, he has shown the harshness and brutality of even avowedly humane systems in managing the control of deviants. And he has also shown the awesome inventiveness and determination of the stigmatized to resist these systems.

Sometimes the revelations have been discomfiting—the metaphor of peristaltic movement to describe the mental patient's passage through hospitalization, for example. But Goffman's analyses have always been particularly acute in assessing the peculiarly difficult position of such powerless people as mental patients.

In his ability to see how the powerless are managed in institutional settings, he also offered a grimly sardonic view of the role certified professionals play in social control. His essay on "The

Erving Goffman, immediate Past-President of the Association and Benjamin Franklin Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, died of cancer on Saturday, November 20, 1982, in Philadelphia. The December FOOTNOTES incorrectly announced the date of death as November 19.

Medical Model..." in *Asylums* stands as a brilliant example of controlled rage at the irony of "therapeutic treatment" that can strip away all sense of self-esteem in the treated and make them into non-persons.

In *Relations in Public* and in *Behavior in Public Places*, Goffman showed how the classic language of status, role, and obligation apply in understanding the most primary kind of status, that of fellow human being—on a street corner, greeting or avoiding greeting, involved or shielded from involvement with others. In his later work (*Frame Analyses, Forms of Talk*) Goffman began to focus on the formal properties of communication to be found in sequences of events and in linguistics.

Goffman as Organization Man

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When Erving Goffman was elected President of ASA, many viewed him as the antithesis of the "organization" man and expressed their fears to me that he might slight his newly acquired administrative obligations. He did not. Working with him the last several years as Executive Officer of the Association, I learned something about him and his "organization" style.

Erving had never been involved previously in the routine activities of the Association but Presidents-elect immediately become involved in program planning. He and his program committee worked effectively and efficiently over the planning year and the results were evident at the last annual meeting. He also involved himself in those responsibilities resulting from his "office" and he took those obligations seriously. At times, such as when he challenged the almost completed Code of Ethics, those who thought Council action would be routine found the delay he forced to be productive and the final product improved. Last year, when he chaired Council, he would often become involved in the discussion and at times would forget his "chair" responsibility. His contributions to the discussion were always insightful and to the point. He learned quickly, and understood the issues which faced the Association and he was creative in seeking solutions. He became concerned about those issues. I was amused but not surprised when recently a member reported to me that Erving had chastised him for not being more involved in the Association. Erving had told him he had a responsibility to be.

He began to develop the rules of transposition from one level of meaning to another and from one mode of communication to another. And he examined the dimensions of power and privilege embedded in that activity—itsself part of the activity of constructing our daily world. This line of analysis also appears in *Gender Advertisements*, where Goffman analyzed photographs to show how they translated male superordination of women into everyday or idealized scenes. Feminists may thank him for this contribution to our knowledge of how the cultural subjugation of women is portrayed.

Throughout his work, an underlying belief in positivism appears. Not everything was socially constructed for Erving Goffman. He showed his allegiance to Durkheim in his belief in social facts. And he owed allegiance to anthropologists Radcliffe-Brown and W. Lloyd Warner as much as to his sociology teachers Louis Wirth and Everett Hughes.

But whether primarily sociologist or anthropologist, positivist or social constructionist, there never

Still, Erving could cause problems. When I sought out those who knew him to write a presidential portrait, they were reluctant, perhaps because they knew only a segment of him and they knew that he would react negatively to descriptive adulation. He was irritated when people deferred to his "reputation". I know, however, that being elected President was important to him and, in retrospect, so was the timing of his election. He also refused to send me a "presidential" photo to be used in *FOOTNOTES*. When I threatened to run a caricature of him or a blank space with his name under it, he promised to send one but I knew he would not.

While the ASA staff was initially intimidated by his reputation, working with him, they soon developed respect and affection. He was always concerned and considerate about their welfare and for the work he created for them. Too, in a short time, Sue and I felt he was an old friend. When he discovered that my term as Executive Officer ended just prior to his term as President, he insisted that I remain on to complete his Presidential term and we could end our associational responsibilities together. His illness intervened. When I wrote him a "personal" report of the meetings, I reminded him of the irony of my presence there and his absence. In his response, he commented that among his many regrets was the inability to use a line he had ready for my departure. He had intended to say at the last meeting of Council, "Russ, dear friend, as you start down the staircase of organizational anonymity, pause a moment and hold out your hand. I'll be down in a minute."

He never came, but he was worth waiting for.

was anyone or anything quite like Erving Goffman. He shot across the sociological horizon like a blazing star and he amazed, amused, captivated and infuriated those who knew him. His interest in analyzing the elements in an interaction, even while in the midst of it, could be maddening to other actors in the setting with him. And his resolute refusal to play the games of social manners often drove others into states of real fury. At the same time he could be kind, gentle and tenderhearted to those he knew; and he was often wildly funny. During his time as an officer of ASA, he made a real effort to transform himself from *enfant terrible* to responsible statesperson. His aptness at learning, his real capacity for thoughtful serious participation—combined with occasional outbursts of hilarity and whimsical observation—made him a target for waspish remarks but also a joy to serve with. The illness that caused him to miss much of his year as President also caused many who serve on Council to realize how much they missed him.

The memory of the combination of Erving Goffman, the great contributor to modern social theory and Erving Goffman the impish iconoclast of the ASA will continue to bemuse his colleagues even as they mourn his passing. But while the peculiarities of Erving Goffman's interactional style may bemuse, the brilliance and significance of his contribution to social theory warrant nothing but the greatest admiration and gratitude.

Burdge Receives Research Award

University of Illinois Professor Rabel J. Burdge has received the National Recreation and Park Association's national award for excellence in research.

Burdge, Professor of Environmental Studies, of Agricultural Economics, and of Leisure Studies, received the Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt award for excellence in recreation and park research at a convention of park and recreation leaders in Louisville, Kentucky in October.

The NRPA described Burdge as "a leader in the analysis of social impacts caused by environmental changes and the study of leisure behavior".

Vice President of the Rural Sociological Society, Burdge is a former editor of the *Journal of Leisure Research* and founder and co-editor of *Leisure Sciences: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

He was principal investigator of "Illinois: Today and Tomorrow", a statewide assessment of citizen input to public policy formation.

Burdge, a 1965 graduate of Ohio State University, was also principal investigator of a study of the impact on rural population of the Lake Shelbyville reservoir.