A Tribute to Eving Goffman

Eving 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 insights 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 nicey and a feeling for words extremly rare among us—never a patronizing to the reader, but thoroughly professional. And his work was endorsed by the enormous Catholicism 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 reveals that despite W. W. White's 1967 assessment that there is already no doubt that Goffman changed the way we think about how we live in and our passage through it. He has examined apparently insignificant, unnoticeable, conventional ways, and found important social principles embedded in routine. Eving Goffman was born in 1922 and he earned his BA at the University of Toronto in 1942, and his Masters and PhD in sociology at the University of Chicago in 1949 and 1952. In 1952, Goffman was appointed 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 book became the most reprinted paperback that inspired so many unperceived patterns of sociology—and changed the shape of the field as well. When one asks colleagues—and also outside sociology—what they knew of Eving Goffman, they mention this great, early work. They often mention the significance of concepts like face, the importance of the hidden, mediating work that must be accomplished for public presentation for all behaviors. But the real significance of his work is his focus on showing the place of any behavior within a system of understanding and about the appropriate context for the display of manners and morals, emotions and behaviors.

For this and many other later works, sociologists honored Goffman in 1965 in the March issue and in 1981 with the presidency of the association. But these formal recognitions cannot sufficiently express what a debt the field owes to Eving Goffman. Goffman's work shows the significance of non-verbal analysis for understanding the world we live in, the importance of each actor who stands out in the everyday world in recreating and maintaining the normative order. It is his focus on the way in which mac- rocosm analysis, though it can show us the patterns of normative order, does not explain why macrocosm analysis is ineffective, though it can show us the patterns of normative order, does not explain why macrocosm analysis is ineffective. Goffman's work is more than a somberly held assumptions and expectations that obscured social structure to show us its formerly invisible and meaningless. For instance, his discussion of taking cigarette and matches away from mental patients showed how this restriction made it impossible for them to engage in the give and take of everyday social activity. And in his analysis of the property of maintaining role distance and playing the role of the ideal. In his analysis of the property of maintaining role distance and playing the role of the ideal, Goffman showed how impression management is a social role rather than a personality issue.

Goffman's fine-grained analyses, his sharp perceptive and metaphors which then guide our own perceptions even afterward, the change for us. As Jesse 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 "fak- ing it"—how people lean up against walls when waiting for someone. It is this perspicacity that sets him well when he shown us how to look for the hidden of institutions and the processes of organization 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 Asyl- lums, 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 in- tentiveness and determination of the stigmatized to resist these systems.

Sometimes the revelations have been dis- covertably filling—the metaphor of peristaltic movement to describe the medical patient's passage through hospitalization, for example. But Goffman's an- alyses have always been particularly sensitive to the peculiarly difficult situation of those powerless people as mental pa- tients.

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

Goffman as an Organization Man

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When Eving 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. Eving had never been involved previously in the routine activities of the Association but Presidents-elect often become involved in the planning. He and his program committee worked together during the planning year and the results were evident at the last annual meeting. He provided himself in those responsibilities resulting from his "office" and he took those obligations seriously. At times, such as when he challenged the almost complete 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 to let others speak. His contributions to the discus- sion were always insightful and to the point. It was not always clear among his many regrets was the inability to use a line he had ready to hand in any of my debates. He also inter- ded to say at the last meeting of Council, "Rice, 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 well worth waiting for.

Still, Eving could cause problems. When I informed those who knew him to write a pre- sidential portrait, they were reluctant, perhaps because they knew only a segment of him and they knew that he was dis- tributive and could be critical. He was irritated when people de- fended to his "organization" style. I know, however, that being elected Presi- dent was important to him and, in retrospect, I am glad I chose that election. He also refused to send me a "presidential" photo to be used in FOCUS. "I'm threatened to run a caricature of him or a blank space with his name under it. I decided to send one but I knew he would not.

While the ASA staff was initially intimidated by his style and working with him, they soon de- veloped respect and affection. He was always concerned and con- cerned 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 Ex- ecutive Officer ended just prior to that term as President, he insisted that I remain on to complete his presidential term and we could re-consider our administrative responsibili- ties together. His illness inter- vented. When I wrote him a "presidential" report, very ill, he reminded me of the irony of my presence there and his absence. In his response, he described how his illness among his many regrets was the inability to use a line he had ready to hand in any of my debates. He also inter- ded to say at the last meeting of Council, "Rice, 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 well worth waiting for.