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Erving Goffman

Gary Alan Fine and Philip Manning

Erving Goffman has a hold on the sociological imagination. While he was perhaps not as broad or subtle a theorist as Durkheim, Simmel, Marx, or Weber, the images and slogans of this scholar have become an integral part of the discipline. The dramaturgical metaphor has become sociology's second skin. As a consequence, Erving Goffman is arguably the most influential American[1] sociologist of the twentieth century.

While this bald statement would be accepted by many, two additional features are also widely accepted. First, Goffman himself can hardly be considered a conventional social theorist. In his thirty-year academic career Goffman did not attempt to develop an overarching theory of society; nor did he raise issues that speak to transhistorical concerns of social order. While on occasion Goffman referred to other social theorists, such references were typically included in passing, and his work does not contain a systematic confrontation with other sociological theorists. Goffman's work can be characterized equally by those central sociological issues that he did not discuss (or did so only briefly), and those that he explored so brilliantly. Second, Goffman does not easily fit within a specific school of sociological thought. Although he was often linked to the symbolic interactionist perspective, he did not readily accept this label (see Goffman (1969, pp. 136–45) for his account of the limitations of this approach). Further, Goffman did not produce a close-knit school of younger scholars who saw themselves as following his agenda (Grimshaw, 1983, p. 147). Goffman embraced and transformed the ideas of certain important social theorists (Durkheim, Simmel, Blumer, and Hughes, and Schutz), and the work of others, who might be labeled his "students," was profoundly influenced by contact with Goffman (John Lofland, Gary Marx, Harvey Sacks, Eviatar Zerubavel, Carol Brooks Gardner, Emmanuel Schegloff, David Sudnow, and Charles and Marjorie Goodwin). However, it is odd, given Goffman's influence, that there are

remarkably few scholars who are continuing his work. In part, this is because Goffman has a signature style, but it is also because Goffman's stylistic approach is not broadly valued in the discipline (Abbott, 1997). This paradox must be at the heart of any analysis of Erving Goffman's theoretical legacy.

GOFFMAN'S LIFE

Erving Manual Goffman was born in Mannville, Alberta, on June 11, 1922, to Ukrainian Jewish parents. His parents, Max and Ann, were among the 200,000 Ukrainians who migrated to Canada between 1897 and 1914 (Winkin, 1988, p. 16). Along with his sister, Frances, he was brought up in Dauphin, near Winnipeg, where later, in 1937, he attended St John's Technical High School. Winkin (1988) reports that, for unknown reasons, his friends called him "Pookie." Goffman showed an initial interest in chemistry, which he pursued at the University of Manitoba in 1939.

In 1943–4 he worked at the National Film Board in Ottawa, where he met Dennis Wrong, who encouraged Goffman's interest in sociology. Soon after, Goffman enrolled at the University of Toronto, where, under the guidance of C. W. M. Hart and Ray Birdwhistell, he read widely in sociology and anthropology. The writings of Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Warner, Freud and Parsons were particularly important to his intellectual development (Winkin, 1988, p. 25). At Toronto, he also developed a close friendship with the anthropologist Elizabeth Bott.

In 1945 Goffman graduated from Toronto with a degree in sociology and moved to the University of Chicago for graduate work. Winkin reports that he was initially overwhelmed by the transition. This may be a euphemistic way of saying that Goffman's grades were not impressive at the beginning of his graduate career. The University of Chicago was hectic and confusing, a situation exacerbated by the many students relying on funding from the GI Bill. After several difficult years Goffman settled into the routine of graduate life, taking numerous courses, including Everett Hughes's seminar on Work and Occupations, where he first heard the expression "total institution," which became important to his later writing (Burns, 1992, p. 101). For reasons perhaps relating to his steady stream of sarcasm, Goffman earned a nickname from his fellow graduate students: "the little dagger" (Winkin, 1988, p. 28).

Data on Goffman's early years in graduate school are sparse (Winkin, 1999), and apparently he kept to himself during that period, reading voraciously. However, in 1949 Goffman completed his MA thesis, based on a survey research project concerning audience reactions to a then popular radio soap opera. Soon after, he left for the Shetland Islands. From December 1949 to May 1951 Goffman lived on the Island of Unst, where he collected ethnographic data for his doctoral dissertation. Masquerading as an American interested in agricultural techniques, he absorbed as much as he could about everyday life on this small Scottish island, partially overcoming the initial suspicions of the islanders, who thought that he might be a spy (Winkin, 1999).

After leaving the Shetland Islands, Goffman moved to Paris, where he completed a draft of his doctoral dissertation. The following year he returned to Chicago and married the 23-year-old Angelica Choate, whom he had met earlier at the university, where she was an undergraduate majoring in psychology. Their son, Tom, was born the following year.

In 1953 Goffman successfully defended his dissertation. His examiners had mixed reactions to his study: several expected a detailed case study and were dismayed to receive what was, in effect, a general theory of face-to-face interaction (Winkin, 1998). After a brief stretch as a research assistant for Edward Shils, Goffman, his wife, and young son moved to Washington, DC, where in 1955 he began observations at St Elizabeths hospital (Goffman, 1961a). For the next three years Goffman spent time at the hospital, where he was given the position of assistant to the athletic director. This marginal position gave him access to all parts of the institution.

On January 1, 1958, Goffman was invited by Herbert Blumer to teach at the University of California at Berkeley, where he was hired as a visiting assistant professor. During the next four years Goffman progressed rapidly. *The Presentation of Self* was reissued by a prominent publisher in the United States in 1959. This was followed by *Asylums* in 1961 and *Encounters* later that year. He was promoted several times and became a full professor in 1962. In addition to his academic interests, Goffman showed himself to be a shrewd stock market analyst and a keen gambler. Goffman was proud of his stock-picking abilities: later in life he boasted that even though he was one of the highest paid sociologists in the United States, he still earned a third of his income from investments and a third from royalties. By contrast, his gambling abilities remain uncertain: there are reports that he was regularly beaten at poker by colleagues at the university; losses that he accepted with grace and good humor (Marx, 1984). He was a stronger blackjack player, and made frequent visits to casinos in Nevada. Indeed, later he trained, qualified, and worked as a blackjack dealer at the Station Plaza Casino in Las Vegas, where he was promoted to pit boss (Andrea Fontana, personal correspondence). In his published work, particularly in the essay "Where the Action Is," Goffman includes tantalizing hints of an ethnography of gambling and casino life; however, he never published a separate study.

During his stay at Berkeley, his wife, Angelica, had serious mental health problems, which resulted in her suicide in 1964. A parallel may exist between Goffman's academic interests in mental illness and his own personal observations of it at home. Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in his 1969 essay, "The Insanity of Place," which is, arguably, autobiographical.

In 1966, Goffman spent a sabbatical year at the Harvard Center for International Affairs. At Harvard he developed a friendship with Thomas Schelling, from whom he strengthened his understanding of game theoretic accounts of human behavior. He resigned his position at Berkeley on June 30, 1968 in order to accept a Benjamin Franklin Chair in Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His salary at that time was $30,000 a year, setting a new high for a sociology professor. For a variety of reasons (perhaps including

salary) Goffman was alienated from his colleagues in sociology, and he spent the first couple of years at the university working out of an office in the Anthropological Museum. The move to Philadelphia did not slow down his research productivity. In 1971 he published *Relations in Public*, in which he brought together many of his ideas about the organization of everyday conduct. Simultaneously he was also working on the book he hoped to be his magnum opus, *Frame Analysis*, eventually published in 1974. Given the long gestation period, the lukewarm reception of the book by the sociological community must have been a disappointment.

In 1981 he married the linguist, Gillian Sankoff, with whom he had a daughter, Alice, in May 1982. On November 20, 1982, he died of stomach cancer, a few weeks after he had to cancel the presentation of his Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association. This paper, "The Interaction Order," was published in the *American Sociological Review* in 1983. The dry humor of the presentation is striking: Goffman added a preface to his speech from his hospital bed, knowing that he would not be able to deliver it in person. The title of the talk was also carefully chosen: this was the title that, in 1953, Goffman had used for the conclusions to his doctoral dissertation. This gesture brought a sense of closure to his intellectual ideas.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT

As Goffman's generation is only now passing from the scene as active scholars, the full history of the period in which he was trained is still being written. Despite Goffman's links with a number of academic and research institutions, including the University of Toronto, the Sorbonne, the University of Edinburgh, the National Institutes of Health, the University of California at Berkeley, Harvard University, and the University of Pennsylvania, the one location that has been taken as having more influence on him than all others is the University of Chicago. As a result of a chance meeting, Goffman decided to attend graduate school with Everett Hughes, a fellow Canadian, at the University of Chicago.

While less has been made of Goffman's tenure at Berkeley and at Pennsylvania than is warranted, it was the social scene in Chicago's Hyde Park in the years after the Second World War that had the most lasting and profound impression. Erving Goffman was very much a product of this time and place.

Hyde Park in the late 1940s and early 1950s was a special location for the development of sociology and sociologists. The roster of graduate students from the period reads like a who's who of the creative minds of the discipline. The most extensive set of accounts detailing the intellectual and social life at the University of Chicago in this period are included in *A Second Chicago School?* (Fine, 1995), a collection of essays that depicts the profound influence of the place and period on the development of sociology in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Prior to 1935, Chicago was the dominant sociology program in the United States, and the world. However, by the late 1940s, the development of "the

General Theory of Action" under Talcott Parsons at Harvard and survey research and functional analysis under Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton at Columbia made Cambridge and Morningside Heights strong contenders, perhaps more "cutting edge" than the embattled qualitative tradition at Chicago (Bulmer, 1984; Gusfield, 1995, pp. ix–x; Camic, 1996; Abbott, 1997). Still, Chicago proved to be an intellectually exciting home for many graduate students, even if the changes in the faculty, notably the move of Herbert Blumer to Berkeley, led to misgivings by the university administration (Abbott and Graziano, 1995). Further, despite the stereotypes that have often linked Chicago sociology to the interactionist project, the department was both theoretically and methodologically diverse (Bulmer, 1984; Platt, 1995).

According to Joseph Gusfield (1995, pp. xv–xvi), himself a graduate student in the period, the cohort in which Goffman came of age as a sociologist was a large one, consisting of a high proportion of Jews and veterans. Further, aside from similarities among the members of the cohort, the very size of the cohort contributed to a sense of cohesion and engagement. The Chicago department never had a large faculty. During the late 1940s, the department had fewer than ten faculty and only seven full professors, and, as these were prominent men, several were likely to be on leave at any one time. During the high point of the postwar years over 200 students were registered in either the MA or the PhD programs. Whereas only four PhDs were granted in 1946, by 1954, twenty-eight were awarded. The explosion in the number of graduate students overwhelmed the ability of the faculty to nurture them or even to provide guidance for preliminary exams and doctoral dissertations (Lopata, 1995, p. 365), and provoked irritation or even bitterness toward the structure of the program, especially by graduate students.

As a result, graduate students banded together for social and intellectual support. In 1947, students who had been active previously in union activity formed a student grievance committee that focused on the neglect of students by the faculty (Lopata, 1995, p. 366). The fact that the committee did not achieve many changes (Chicago defined itself as a research university, with teaching graduate students a secondary priority) created graduate student cohesion. In addition, the structure of the department led graduate students to formulate their problems independently from faculty members, leading to scholarly creativity early in their careers. Thus, even Goffman's early work, such as his writings on the significance of class symbols, though clearly influenced by some Chicago faculty and by other graduate students, was also uniquely his own.

However, other factors were at work. One important feature was the geographical ecology of Hyde Park, which helped to form an aggregate of graduate students into a cohesive social group. Gusfield points out that most of the cohort lived within a few blocks of each other, near the somewhat isolated campus, surrounded by a rundown urban area. The campus was a defended neighborhood, circled by a seemingly hostile outside world. Gusfield notes that the many rundown apartment houses made it possible for most graduate students to afford housing close to campus. Students found common hangouts, such as Jimmy's

qualitative and ethnographic methods, as evidenced by qualitative journals and ethnographic articles in the flagship journals of the discipline. Even though Erving Goffman cannot be considered an exemplary ethnographer – his ethnographic writings were too casual (Fine and Martin, 1990) – the prominence of his writings made a claim that participant observation research could produce rich and persuasive theory. This is exemplified in Goffman's discussion of his research in the Shetland Islands, described in *The Presentation of Self*, and his more elaborate detailing of the strategies of patients in St Elizabeths hospital in *Asylums*. If these were not the most detailed or exemplary ethnographies of the period in methodological terms, they were, along with William Foote Whyte's 1943 *Street Corner Society*, the most influential and among the most widely read. Goffman demonstrated that a cogent example, coupled with a powerful turn of phrase, could encourage the sociological imagination. Further, Goffman's writing style has contributed to a loosening of the rules by which social scientists communicate (Fine, 1988; Fine and Martin, 1990). Goffman's sardonic, satiric, jokey style has served to indicate that other genres and tropes can be legitimate forms of academic writing.

In substantive arenas, Goffman's writings have had repercussions as well. Most notably, *Asylums* provided an impetus for the movement to deinstitutionalize mental patients and to eliminate the large state mental hospitals that often served as warehouses for those who stood outside of societal norms. Whether the massive deinstitutionalization of mental patients contributed to the problem of homelessness, it cannot be doubted that the movement to change the role of the mental hospital was given voice by the searing images found in Goffman's writings.

Goffman's influence is also evident in the usage that various sociologists have made of the concept of frame. The image of a frame as a means of exploring how individuals and groups come to define their environment has been particularly prevalent in the examination of social movements (Snow et al., 1986; Gamson, 1992). In this model, distinct from the usage of frame proposed by Goffman or Gregory Bateson, the actions of social movement participants depend on how they perceive the frameworks in which they are embedded. Frame represents the content of the story by which individuals and groups come to recognize their worlds. This usage does not suggest that a frame represents the kind of reality (an experiment, play, conning) that is being faced, but rather the meaning of the situation. Still, even if the definitions of frame do not accord exactly with that proposed in *Frame Analysis*, this cultural and interactional model of social movements was inspired by Goffman's writing.

Finally, we can trace the concern with the construction of meaning and the phenomenology of reality to Goffman's writings. The increase in interest in symbolic interaction and conversation analysis (the most influential offshoot of ethnomethodology) is in considerable measure an effect of Goffman's emphasis that social interaction is not a given, but is negotiated by participants (Maynard and Zimmerman, 1984; Manning and Ray, 1993). While Goffman was neither the first scholar to make this argument nor the most vigorous proponent of the position, his status as a major social theorist whose works

were assigned to generations of graduate students had a unique influence. This constructionist perspective is now a taken-for-granted aspect of sociological thought, even by those whose own research is based upon the assumption that social perspectives converge sufficiently to permit statistical analysis.

VALUING GOFFMAN

This chapter is not intended to be a paean to a Goffmanian sociology. Yet we repeat, as we began, that Goffman is arguably the most significant American social theorist of the twentieth century; his work is widely read and remains capable of redirecting disciplinary thought. His unique ability to generate innovative and apt metaphors, coupled with the ability to name cogent regularities of social behavior, has provided him an important position in the sociological canon. Further, his sardonic, outsider stance has made Goffman a revered figure – an outlaw theorist who came to exemplify the best of the sociological imagination.

Although Erving Goffman's most influential work was published almost forty years ago, and he died nearly two decades ago, his analyses feel very contemporary: perhaps the first postmodern sociological theorist. Erving Goffman – and his former graduate student colleagues at the University of Chicago in the immediate postwar years – provided models that reoriented sociology. If sociology as a discipline has changed over the past several decades – and it clearly has done so dramatically – it is in considerable measure because of the directions that Erving Goffman suggested that practitioners pursue.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1 As we note, Goffman was born in Canada, but his graduate training and employment was in the United States.
2 In an interesting empirical application of this argument, Goffman used a frame analytic perspective to analyze gender. In *Gender Advertisements* (1979) Goffman argued that some male–female rituals are best understood as a keying of parent–child rituals.

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