In Search of the Basic Structures of Experience

Forms of Talk, by ERVING GOFFMAN. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981. 335 pp. $20.00 cloth. $7.95 paper.

HARVEY A. FARBERMAN
SUNY/Stony Brook

Forms of Talk consists of five essays: "Replies and Responses," "Response Cries," "Footings," "The Lecture," and "Radio Talk." The first three are light revisions of already published journal articles and advance an analytic perspective that undergoes substantive application in the last two. Although for a sociologist (like me) who is monumentally ignorant of conversational and sociolinguistic analysis the three analytical essays are more difficult than the two substantive essays, they also are more useful as conduits to Goffman's underlying program, and, I believe, fairly or not, it is this that is of general interest to the wider social science community. Besides, the terminal pieces are uneven.

Here I want to enter a caveat: since Goffman acquires his own position through reangled, repetitious attack rather than linear advance, my own effort at reconstructive interpretation may well fail to catch the significance of things from his point of view. As far as I can tell, though, his program has four parts: (1) an observation concerning the part-for-whole character of talk, (2) an exhortation on behalf of contextual analysis, (3) a programmatic desire to discover the basic structures of experience, and (4) a commitment to do so under the methodological postulate of determinism.

Goffman begins with the general assumption that talk has a part-for-whole quality, an asymmetric, one-way synecdoche wherein speakers always say less than hearers understand them to say. In other words, talk is laconic but flexible: the typical discontinuities (or, indeed, continuities) between and among what is said, shown, meant, heard, and understood, as well as the range of different even contrary and contradictory messages that can be conveyed to different receivers of the very same utterance, suggest that some hidden logic-of-transfer, or structure of facilitating contexts, is at work that enables hearers to take the bits and pieces of emitted communicative debris and fashion them into whole conversations that have content and impact.

Traditional linguistic analysis shows us how we may reconstruct the surface semantic level of an incomplete or chaotic sentence by appealing to the underlying grammatical context. This grammar constrains the meaning of the sentence even as the meaning of the sentence depends on the grammar. Conversational analysts add to this the possibility of reclaiming the meaningful sequence of a chain of questions and answers (or, better, as Goffman shows, statements and replies) out of the hodgepodge of linguistic, paralinguistic, and nonlinguistic elements, given an understanding of dialogical format. In either case, the rules of grammar or dialogue operate as conditioning contexts of surface meaning and provide both a resource for reconstruction and a standard for assessment. Now Goffman speculates that we may well be able to go still further by identifying and understanding the nature and dynamics of more broadly conceived interactional contexts. This presumably will allow us to understand how everyday speakers and hearers interpret or define the global meaning of piecemeal utterance.

Apparently, every interaction context has a complex and variable arrangement of each of the following components: "ritualization," "participation framework," and "embedding." Ritualization (understood with an ethological overtone) refers to the unintended, unthinkingly expressive, ceremonious etiquette that members of the species typically radiate toward each other that enables them to live advantageously with each other and within the species' propitious niche. These expressive encounters signal the regard actors have for each other, provide for remediation when
breaches occur, and oblige shamed parties to effect redress if none is forthcoming. The purpose or function of any given piece of mundane ceremony, however, can be understood only in terms of the consequences it has for social interchange and, often, that understanding is had best either in the normative breach or nonoccurrence.

The second component of the interactional context is the participation framework, which refers to everyone within the perceptual range of a mentionable event. Participants may be there as ratified or designated receivers, may overhear transmissions slated for others, or may simply be welcome bystanders. Whatever the participation status, its occupant will be constrained to display conduct appropriate to it.

The third component is embedding, which refers to who or, in whose name, someone is "speaking." Is the person who is speaking the author, subject, object, or principal of the words being spoken? Is a person speaking for herself or himself in the here and now? Recalling what she or he herself has said elsewhere? Rehearsing what she or he intends to say later? Recounting what someone else says or she or he said? Delivering something already memorized? Reading from a text someone else prepared? Or, speaking spontaneously?

The empirical concretization of these analytically separable components may be understood as comprising the interactional context and, when activated in communication, may be seized in a unit of analysis called the "mentionable event" or "ritual interchange." Any mentionable event, accordingly, will be constrained to display conduct appropriate to the 'same' event... these fundamental frameworks themselves form a framework—a framework of frameworks" (p. 68).

Goffman goes on to argue that we might well begin with a single utterance and show it to have a variety of meanings, that these meanings may be grouped into a limited number of separate and fundamentally different classes, and that these classes may well open the door to the basic structure of experience. Indeed, it is the search for some sort of framework of frameworks, or metaschema, that will enable a detailed and dynamic understanding of how contexts actually alter meaning. And, under what methodological convention should this inquiry proceed? On this Goffman is quite clear: Whatever may be the relationship between what and how a person communicates; between what one person says, means to say, and is heard to say; between what one person says and the next person says; between what one person refers to and the next person refers to; and, no matter how obvious or obscure, continuous or discontinuous, aligned or unaligned any of this may be, the search for underlying connections should be guided by the postulate of determinism. Which is to say that choice, selection, disjunction, and discrepancy should be approached "As though all the degrees of freedom available to whosoever is about to talk can somehow be mapped out, conceptualized, and ordered, somehow neatly grasped and held, somehow made to submit to the patterning out effected by analysis" (p. 72).

So, Goffman's program appears to have several components: (1) the grounded assumption that flexible and laconic talk has a part-for-whole quality so that people typically understand all of what was meant irrespective of what was said; (2) that this is possible because interactional contexts constrain meaning and enable people to appropriately and selectively fill in the blanks; (3) that these infinite acts of typical or unique interpretation (unthinkingly) express the logical possibilities of experience that are a consequence of the operation of a finite set of culturally specific reinterpretation frames; and (4) that the connection among them is determinate.

Goffman has acquired competence in certain aspects of sociolinguistic analysis, observed shortcomings, and is attempting to supply missing pieces. He is a sociologist whose interests, concerns, and work now speak more to sociolinguists than to sociologists. He shows interest in how individuals construct, and reconstruct, interpret and reinterpret, frame and reframe definitions
of any "mentionable event," and thereby ap­
ppears to be interested in the subjective, nomi­
nal experience of individuals; yet, this is but
data for more foundational analysis. Actually,
he is not in this work interested intrinsically in
individuals and their interpretations at all, but
in the underlying determinate forms of their
experience.

So, Goffman’s interest in the forms of talk is
as an entry vehicle to the structure(s) of expe­
rience. He no longer shows interest in the
forms of action as an entry vehicle to the
structures of reality, unless, of course, he
equates talk with action and experience with
reality—an arguable if dubious technical—
ideological convenience.

But, if there are culturally specific basic
structures of experience, where are they? Are
they buried deep in our collective ancestral
experience? Are they out of awareness but
conditioned by concrete history? Are they in
our language? Are they distributed throughout
our kinesic and proxemic systems? Are they
everywhere because buried in our evolutionary
species being? Are they second-order ana­
lytical constructs adduced from data by a keen
and knowledgeable theorist? In whose experi­
ence and by whose experience is the basic
structure of experience to be adduced, dis­
covered, invented? And, is it possible to dis­
cover, uncover, invent these basic underlying
structures other than through some interpre­
tive procedure? What then, is the nature of a
“mentionable event”? Does it have a nature
apart from an individual’s interpretation, con­
struction, or frame? Is it an integral feature of
an already ongoing prefigured social organiza­
tion? Is it an expression of strategic, cultural
intentionness?

Perhaps it is unfair to lay down a barrage of
metatheoretical and epistemological ques­
tions. But in the waning hours of positivism
and functionalism, one looks to the foremost
practitioners of the craft for guidance. And
here the lines between and among structural,
formal, and interpretive analysis remain indis­
tinct.

The Attribution of Gender and Other Traits

Gender Advertisements, by ERVING GOFFMAN. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979. 84
pp. $12.50 cloth. $4.95 paper (Harper & Row).

THOMAS C. HOOD
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Is a picture worth a thousand words? If so,
this book is longer than it appears, for it con­
tains five hundred black-and-white reproduc­
tions of magazine advertisements, photo­
graphs, and prints. Like most of Goffman’s
work it starts by paying close attention to the
small, “taken for granted” aspects of social
interactions. Goffman was interested in the
ritual aspects of interaction in Relations in
Public (1971). He introduces the idea there
that his naturalistic observations have been
inspired by ethologists and linguists who are
interested in the small, repeated behaviors
that occur in nonverbal and verbal interaction.
But Goffman goes beyond these sensitizing
perspectives into his own perspective on the
social order.

Like his other works, Gender Advertise­
ments is useful in part because it “debunks”
contemporary society. Veblen received many
references for his analysis of the economic
significance of the corset, skirt, and high­
heeled shoe. Goffman will receive many ref­
rences for calling our attention to the small
symbols that we use to generate and maintain
status differences among the sexes. In fact, “heresy of heresies,” he suggests:

What the human nature of males and fe­
male really consists of, then, is a capacity
to learn to provide and to read depictions of
masculinity and femininity and a willingness
to adhere to a schedule for presenting these
pictures, and this capacity they have by
virtue of being persons, not females or
males. One might just as well say there is no
gender identity. There is only a schedule for
the portrayal of gender [p. 8].

The heretical aspect of this statement has
been documented in the literature on sex roles
for some time. John Money and others have
documented that a genetic male can be raised
as a girl and a genetic female raised as a boy.
Stage impersonators show us they can per­
form competently as the opposite gender.
Heterosexual transvestites delight in being
able to do ordinary activities of the opposite
sex in public without detection. Presumably
For twenty-five years Goffman has been telling us that social scientists put too much faith in the idea that human nature is something different from social order. Goffman insists that those things that we thought inherently imbedded in the nature of individuals are really inferred from hundreds of little actions that we learn to associate with a trait in question. So it is with femininity. What is it that causes us to recognize a female as female and a male as male? These questions, and particularly the former, are the subject matter of this book. The answer is that gender is advertised by many small nonverbal actions that are taken to be typical of women.

Largely the analysis is of the subordinate position of women in relation to men in contemporary Western societies. Gornick summarizes many of the salient points in her introduction, but it is clear that Goffman has provided a quietly documented look at the little ways that women and children are "saved from seriousness" by nonverbal conventions in our society. In addition to his analysis of how femininity and masculinity are conveyed, Goffman suggests that some of our most enduringly institutionalized hierarchical conventions are bound up in the ways we have been taught to show a bond with the opposite sex. Women and children snuggle and nuzzle. A man wraps a protective arm around the shoulder or provides a shield behind which the woman or child may take shelter. A woman wears clothes in a playful fashion; a man is costumed appropriately for his purpose. A couple in which the woman appears much taller than the man seems inappropriate unless the woman displays higher social status. Women lie down, cant their bodies and heads, bend their knees, strike unsuspicious poses in the sense that they are displaying themselves for the purpose of communicating a quality of feeling rather than undertaking some purposeful venture. Men in advertisements are on their way somewhere. Women in advertisements are on display.

Goffman chooses unusual data for analysis of the way in which gender behavior is portrayed. It is unusual in that everyone recognizes that the models that appear in magazine advertisements are posed. They are posed to attract our attention but not in such a way that we are alarmed or dismayed by what we see. Magazine advertisements provide a studied conventionality in the poses one finds. This conventionality is the ritual of expression that enables us to take magazine advertisements as something other than a joke. We glance at the advertisement. We find the behavior typical. We read the pitch and pass by, not finding anything out of the ordinary in what we have seen. This unremarkable quality of the advertisement coupled with the attractiveness of the model is what Goffman believes makes advertisements a reasonable source for data. Granted the models are posed, they are posed so as to appear in a scene that we can interpret in a nonhumorous fashion. Thus the photographer and the editor are choosing pictures that they believe to represent an acceptable view of a nonverbally expressed relationship or trait.

Goffman's longest essay in the book is "Picture Frames." Persons acquainted with Frame Analysis (1974) and Relations in Public (1971) will find his methodological remarks easy to understand. Goffman argues here that commercial photographs are meaningful because they have a realism grounded in the institutionalized arrangements of our daily lives. These scenes are a glimpse of reality that the photographer must arrange in a frame and that we as viewers must be able to interpret. Such "scenes" differ from the "self-worship" found in private pictures designed to reflect a favorable image to the family or individuals. Those familiar with Goffman's style will find his careful delineation of conceptual categories in this essay. Private and public pictures are distinguished. "Caught" or "candid" photography described. "Doctored" and "rigged" pictures differentiated. The concepts of keying and fabrication developed in Frame Analysis (1974) become important tools to analyze the scenes in photographs. Goffman presents a discussion of the personal portrait that becomes a means for refining the concept of "posing." Two quotations:

Commercial posing avowedly transforms a model into almost anyone the advertiser wants to construct an imaginary scene around; private portraiture transforms a model into a decorative representation of himself... Private portraiture, public
portraiture for purposes of publicity, caught news shots of national leaders, and even art photography of "interesting looking" faces, all reflect the fundamental fact that their models are not presenting themselves in a personal or social identity not their "own"; that is what underlies our commonsense designation of these pictures as "actually of" their subjects [p. 17].

What the advertisement is concerned to depict is not particular individuals already known, but rather activity which would be recognizable were we to see it performed in real life by persons not known to us personally [p. 19].

The book contains much of value to sociologists interested in visual representations of social life particularly through the medium of still photography. The field is still in its early stages, but this book and others, like Jon Wagner, *Images of Information* (1979), suggest that the still camera and its products may provide both valuable data and teaching tools. In the future I hope to see more communication between recognized photographers who have a "sociological eye" and sociologists who are seeking to transfer their sociological skill to the medium of photography.

Some general remarks about the place of this work in Goffman's perspective and in sociology generally conclude this essay. Many commentators have attempted to categorize Goffman's work. In this work he specifically refers to his view of gender display and have argued that what, if anything, characterizes persons as sex-class members is their competence and willingness to sustain an appropriate schedule of displays; only the content of the displays distinguishes the classes [p. 8].

I prefer to use the insights in this and other parts of his work as a springboard into the study of the attribution of character. In an essay read at the 1980 ASA meetings, I echoed Goffman's point in "Where the Action Is" (1967) that character is the fundamental illusion. The illusion is such for two reasons. First, character is attributed to the individual on the basis of symbolic interpretation of physical appearance. More than gender is inferred from physical appearance as the consumers of the Molloy book, *Dress for Success* (1975), surely practice and appear to believe. Yet physical appearance is relatively easy to manipulate. Second, we are encouraged to believe that since our physical bodies are unique ("Who has a set of fingerprints like yours?") our characters are unique ("Who has a set of experiences like yours?"). While our fingerprints may well be unique, the interpretations we come to make of our own experiences most definitely are conditioned by the language and culture that we share. Character is an expression and reflection of the traits considered valuable by a particular society. The evidential process by which traits are attributed to individuals and the way in which an individual acquires and loses a reputation are not well understood. Nevertheless, Goffman's works, including this one, put us on the path to understanding the link between social orders and the characters constructed by adherents of those orders.

**Other Literature Cited**


