

Erving Goffman, An Interdisciplinary Anthropologist at Work: the case of his contribution to notions of “situatedness” and “identity” in contemporary ethnographic research (especially in educational and public settings)

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Abstract: This paper is a personal reflection on some major theoretical contributions and interdisciplinary influences of the late Erving Goffman (1922-1982), who considered himself anthropologist as well as sociologist. Goffman developed cutting edge theoretical notions and a methodological approach to using naturalistic qualitative data from a range of sources. One result is considerable influence on current ethnographic research in education, particularly that using linguistic and social interactional data, and on discourse and pragmatic analysis within linguistics. The paper suggests that this influence derives in large part from Goffman’s early concern with the nature of the social situation as a proper analytic unit (“The Neglected Situation, *AA* 1964) which he continued to pursue throughout his career, including more and more linguistic data, culminating in *Forms of Talk*, 1981. The paper calls attention to the continuing and foundational relevance of Goffman’s work to the development of a notion of “situatedness” in ethnographic educational research (and the study of discourse in naturalistic settings generally), despite the fact that Goffman never carried out educational research himself, nor held himself accountable to paradigms within education or linguistics. Rather, his conceptualization of the social situation as a viable analytic unit for scholars of sociology and social anthropology provided a stepping stone for highly productive and creative crossdisciplinary inquiries in education, linguistics, pragmatics, sociology (especially conversation analysis), and general anthropology. Key salience of ritual in the social interpretation of situatedness and identity is highlighted.

Note: The hand-out for the oral presentation is included at the end. This combined document was prepared for inclusion in the Erving Goffman Archives in spring 2015. No substantial changes to the text of this paper have been made since its presentation in 2011, although slightly altered versions have been presented to audiences with interests in Goffman other than the history of anthropology and interdisciplinary influence. The basic analysis was first developed for an invited session of Social Context of Education at the 2001 American Educational Research Association meetings in Seattle.

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Erving Goffman, an Interdisciplinary Anthropologist

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This paper is a focused personal reflection on the exemplary scholarship of the late Erving Goffman (1922-1982) and its continuing foundational relevance to current ethnographic research, particularly that using face-to-face linguistic and social interaction data (or discourse in natural settings).

Here I trace a few intellectual pathways, call attention to my own favorite “tidemark” concepts, and hope to shed light on Goffman’s twin legacies of (1) model work in uncharted waters of the type that builds collaborative interdisciplinary knowledge and (2) useful concepts for studying face-to-face social interaction, derived from his analytical paradigm for studying the institutionalization of social order. I highlight his contribution to current notions of “situated-ness” and, secondarily, “identity.”

Examples focus on educational settings, an area of research for me in which I was privileged to have Goffman as a consultant for my first effort (1978-80). I draw also from public anyone-to-anyone settings such as service encounters, a key interest for Goffman and the subject of my dissertation research (in Linguistics at Penn), for which Goffman was a mentor.

Erving Goffman grew up in Canada, and studied sociology at the University of Toronto, and the University of Chicago, carrying out dissertation research in the Shetland Isles, after which he spent most of his career in the United States. His empirical research used primarily participant observation, and that first study, originally conceived as a study of rural life, anchored his life-long interest in “communication and conduct in everyday life.” He considered himself an anthropologist as well as a sociologist, publishing some of his most important early papers in the *American Anthropologist*. After research appointments at the National Institute of Mental Health in Washington, DC and many productive years in the Department of Sociology at the University of California at Berkeley (1958-68), Erving Goffman’s last professional post was as Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania (1968-1982) in Philadelphia. His presidential address to the American Sociological Association was published posthumously in 1983.

Goffman’s interest in eclectic sources and cross-disciplinary fertilization of knowledge was evident early on. While typically working on his own, he showed genuine interest in others’ efforts, and collaborated to promote new

opportunities. Early on, he became friends with Clifford Geertz, and at Berkeley worked with John Gumperz and Dell Hymes (who involved him in “The Ethnography of Communication”), and trained Emanuel Schegloff, David Sudnow, and the late Harvey Sacks (who went on to develop the related arena of sociological inquiry known as Conversation Analysis). At Penn, Goffman served as faculty member for the graduate group of several university departments, including anthropology, sociology, linguistics, psychology, folklore, and communication, and encouraged numerous students and colleagues. Working closely with Dell Hymes (who preceded him at Penn), William Labov, John Schwed, Sol Worth and others, he co-founded the Center for Urban Ethnography and the University of Pennsylvania Press series on *Communication and Conduct*, and was for many years co-editor of the journal *Language in Society*. He was a sought-after advisor for social science efforts generally.

Goffman is known primarily as a social theorist, the integrity of his *oeuvre* deriving from his unswerving attention to the nature of social organization in maintaining social order. When occasionally borrowing concepts and examples from other disciplines such as linguistics, ethology, education, and medicine, he carefully formulated his adaptation of these resources to be accountable to this concern. Throughout his career Goffman developed concepts that were complementary to, interwoven with, and that built upon, each other, and that gave us a more and more detailed set of parameters for the study of social interaction generally (see, e.g., *Interaction Ritual* and *Relations in Public*).

One of Goffman’s fundamental concepts is the “face engagement” or “encounter,” which provides a kind of minimal social context for reckoning the (socially salient) actions of individuals, while at the same time providing a perspective that speaks to (the trajectories of) collective activity. He argued early on for the importance of personal dignity and “face” in maintaining social order, perhaps especially under the conditions of modern social change.

Combining his own selective empirical investigation with analytical scholarship, Goffman went on to propose the importance of a “social self” that is recognizably distinct from the “psychological self.” Examining the construction of a “social self” affords a nuanced approach to understanding how two or more individuals engage in social interaction, either as a unique

encounter, or as their relationship develops over time. Much contemporary work on “identity” in discourse refers to Goffman’s work (e.g., Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton 1999; Hoyle and Adger 1998; DeFina, Bamberg, and Schiffrin 2006; Stanton 2006; Tannen, Kendall, and Gordon 2007; Wertsch 2002; Wodak et al 2009).

Goffman’s influence on current notions of “situated-ness” can be traced back to his early concern with the nature of the social situation as a proper analytic unit (“The Neglected Situation,” *AA* 1964, discussed below) which he continued to develop throughout his career, including more and more linguistic data, culminating in his last published volume *Forms of Talk*, 1981. Goffman’s interest in social organization and the social structuring of the self had led him to examine speech and talk (especially as socialization). His close investigations of language in naturalistic settings emerged at the same time that discourse analysis and pragmatics were emerging in linguistics and philosophy, and conversational analysis in sociology.

Like most truly fine theorists, Goffman had a genius for selecting research venues whose empirical description had relevance for both general social theory and the scholar’s particular interest. For Goffman, this was changing “modernizing” western society. Typically, his data selection would, in so far as possible, “naturally” constrain some important variable aspect of social interaction in complex society – for example, how well people at a site of interaction know each other.

One formative feature of social interaction associated with modern geographic mobility and mass anonymity is the typical stranger-to-stranger relationship between interactants in public settings. It may have been Goffman’s teacher at Toronto, C.W.M. Hart, who first impressed upon him the psychological power of strangeness and familiarity in the organization of society, and how these are fundamental to ceremonial rituals in warfare and rites of passage such as puberty and marriage. Hart asserted that even in small relatively closed communities, interpersonal strangeness might be enacted with masks and special costumes, using ceremonial objects in sacred places, and argued that familiarity and strangeness was a universal aspect of the difference between formal and informal education (this Goffman shared with me when I began my work on primary classroom interaction). It may have been this insight that led Goffman to first seek out social arenas where relationships between participants – their enacted strangeness or familiarity

with each other as it were -- appeared to be relatively invariant (or “flat”) and straightforwardly related to other features of social organization (much as has been explicitly argued for studies of “situated discourse” in Merritt 1994).

For example, in the Shetland Isles (the site of Goffman’s dissertation work), everyone was known to everyone, and that full social knowledge (of kin relationships, social class, occupational status, shared interpretations of age and gender) seemed to over-determine the shape of all social interaction, while the influence of various “settings” (such as home and work) was relatively minimized. In a subsequent study, Goffman immersed himself in the total institution of a mental hospital in the United States where participants developed relationships with each other that were heavily circumscribed by the scope of their roles in the institution (as inmate and doctor, for example), and by their social interaction being contained within a physical space that inmates were not free to leave. Some time later, when Goffman became interested in social interaction structured by tightly rule-governed activities, he carried out a small study of game playing at a casino in Nevada. In each study the locus of observation (Merritt, 1979) was critically selected.

A diligent scholar, Goffman studied carefully the foundational basis of earlier work, with particular admiration for the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (Deborah Schiffrin argues also for the special influence of Georg Simmel, Marcel Mauss, and George Herbert Mead; Paul Manning cites Durkheim and Simmel; Richard Bauman notes the acknowledgment to Alfred Schutz; of these, only Durkheim is mentioned in the farewell essay). Goffman’s ability to “extend” a borrowed concept (or metaphor) was a signature aspect of his intellectual creativity, and part of what his work offers as a model of social theory and interdisciplinary knowledge-building.

In the early important paper “On the Nature of Deference and Demeanor” (1956, *American Anthropologist*) Goffman reviews and refines Durkheim’s concept of the “sacred” and the “profane” to talk about ritual as an aspect of all social interaction. The analysis took apart a fundamental sociological insight so that its reformulation might be usefully applied to modern and cross-cultural settings. Briefly, “deference” involves displays of respect for the “other”, while “demeanor” involves displays of respect for the “self,” though the two are often conflated (as when one wears attractive formal dress to a wedding out of deference to the couple and seriousness of the

occasion, while at the same time showing proper demeanor and respect for oneself by dressing as one worthy of being an invitee).

Displays of both deference and demeanor are largely determined by variable cultural practices (for example, a white wedding dress in Christian ceremonies, a red wedding sari in Hindu ceremonies). Cultural practices may involve either “presentational rituals” such as a military salute, or “avoidance rituals” such as lowering the eyes (or as in many parts of the world wives refrain from using their husbands’ first names in the presence of others). Goffman suggested that social organization is continually displayed and reaffirmed -- indeed “constructed” -- through repeated displays of deference and demeanor among those who are a part of that organization. Ideally, then, to maintain social order, “Deference and demeanor practices must be institutionalized so that the individual will be able to project a viable, sacred self and stay in the game on a proper ritual basis.” (p. 497)

While Goffman never claimed universal applicability for the analytical concepts he developed – and was always careful to describe particular settings in empirical research – he expected concepts to be useful to other scholars (e.g. Allen 2002, Goodwin 1990, Philips 1983, Scollon and Scollon 1988, who were studying other (sub)cultures). I believe that Goffman’s own inquiries were rooted in Durkheim’s analysis of the “sacred” and the “profane” and follow Durkheim’s concern to understand social change in contemporary society. Goffman was a man of the twentieth century and modern mainstream Western society, and -- though not an “applied social scientist” who sought to use science to solve social problems -- he very much wanted his analysis of social phenomena to speak to, and be useful to, that society (Frankel 1990, Merriman 2002, Merritt and Humphrey 1980).

The power of his analyses drew from their accessibility to a wide readership – either experientially or imaginatively. He used the imagistic and narrative sources of metaphor to great advantage.

For example, in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman very effectively used the metaphor of a stage play to “unpack” the complex interactions of participants in real life. He pointed out that words spoken by an actor represent the words of the author of the play, that the actor is also the physical animator of those words and gestures, and through that performed ensemble projects a figure or character in the play. In real life we often expect “authentic” persons to be all three: author, animator, and

figure. Once we as readers see the complexity of the stage actor's performance, however, we can accept Goffman's argument that in many public situations our own behavior is very much like the actor on stage: our actions are scripted and "authored" by the institution we represent ("Who can tell me the answer to this question?") and the "figure" is that of a generic role we are playing in that particular institution (a teacher in a school, a waitress at a restaurant), so that as "animator" we display circumspect standardized behavior and dress.

Soon after this, Goffman assembled his ideas about the nature of social situations in *Behavior in Public Places* (1963). In 1964, a concise distillation of his argument appeared in the *American Anthropologist* as part of a special issue on "The Ethnography of Communication" (edited by John J. Gumperz and Dell H. Hymes) under the title, "The Neglected Situation." Again referring to his 19th century mentor Emile Durkheim (this time without explanation as He with a capital "h"), Goffman writes

"...It can be argued that social situations, at least in our society, constitute a reality *sui generis* as He [note G's use of capital "h"] used to say, and therefore need and warrant analysis in their own right, much like that accorded other basic forms of social organization..." (p.134)

He goes on to consider the adjective

"...“Situational.” Is the speaker talking to same or opposite sex, subordinate or superordinate, one listener or many, someone right there or on the phone; is he reading a script or talking spontaneously; is the occasion formal or informal, routine or emergency? Note that it is not the attributes of social structure that are here considered, such as age and sex, but rather the value placed on these attributes as they are acknowledged in the situation current and at hand.” (p. 134)

He argues that social situations are writs of social organization, where individuals, in fact, define each other and socialize each other in their respective situational roles. In institutional settings these are typically associated with instrumental goals that are explicitly recognized. In schools for example, teachers instruct and students learn academic information and skills. In retail stores, servers sell and customers buy commodities.

At the same time, however, human interaction is inherently social in nature and always involves more than the instrumentalities of information exchange and activity coordination. There are displays of deference and demeanor, of social identity and alignment, that are informally judged (and sanctioned) by other participants for their ritual salience. The maintenance of “ritual equilibrium,” a general state of mutually held respect among participants, is a covert or unstated goal of all social situations including those of the primary classroom and the service encounter (the argument for which I elaborate for the case of service encounters and primary classrooms in Merritt 1976a and 1998, respectively).

Some basic terminology is in order:

Briefly, Goffman defines a **social situation** as “an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities, anywhere within which an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are “present”, and similarly find them accessible to him.” The aggregate of those persons present in the social situation he called a **gathering**, whatever their involvement. Within the gathering, he noted that there may be one or more **encounters** or face engagements, where two or more individuals “jointly ratify one another as co-sustainers of a shared focus of visual and cognitive attention.” He goes on to make clear that encounters often entail activity structures as well as states of talk: “Card games, ball-room couplings, surgical teams in operation, and fist fights provide examples of encounters; all illustrate the social organization of shared current orientation, and all involve an organized interplay of acts of some kind...Note that the natural home of speech is one in which speech is not always present.” (p. 135) “.... Talk is socially organized, not merely in terms of who speaks to whom in what language, but as a little system of mutually ratified and ritually governed face-to-face action, a social encounter.” (p. 136)

Goffman was always “alive” to the real world, and to corroborative and challenging evidence that could creatively reshape the paradigm. He also revisited and synthesized his own prior work.

His masterful 1959 *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* had woven together the findings of the first two empirical studies. There he extended the psychological concept of the “self”, steeped in personality traits and familial patterns to the sociological concept of the “social self”, based on

socially ratified participation and/or social alignment of the individual to various groupings and activities. Goffman argued that the social self was essentially “constructed” through these situational enactments and habits of practice, with other actors and cultural props prompting appropriate scripts, roles, and alignments. This work is foundational in social psychology and still read as state of the art (Branaman (Ed.) 2001). Much of the currently fashionable work on social identity is coterminous with interpretations of the social self. Goffman himself later explored racial and gender identities and representations in *Stigma* (1963) and *Gender Advertisements* (1979).

His early work on the social self noted that roles are played out and “staged” in social situations. *Asylums* (1961) already used the term “social situation” in its subtitle. He turned next to a more general consideration of “social situations” in public places -- in that social arena where interaction is frequently between strangers (in modern urban geographically mobile contemporary literate industrialized society). In 1963 Goffman published *Behavior in Public Places*, treating the complex nature of our fluid comingling in public spaces -- where people are constantly coming and going, performing tasks, and engaging and disengaging from each other. Whereas *The Presentation of Self* had emphasized management of impressions by individuals, *Behavior in Public Places* emphasized constraints and resources of situations themselves (parallel to “footing” and “frame” introduced later).

In 1971 he published *Relations in Public: microstudies of the public order*. While becoming increasingly interested in the social use of language and talk, Goffman continued to examine the social context of states of talk in an analytically rigorous way. Importantly, he borrowed and developed the ethological concept of “territory” (often associated with permanence) by first describing participants’ orientation to their physical environment and then extending this orientation to temporarily-occupied territories such as café booths and moving territories such as automobiles (as distinct from fixed dwelling places like houses). He further noted that “territory” implies “boundaries” that are socially maintained, thus allowing him to extend the concept of “territory” through extending the notion of “boundary”: After introducing tangible boundaries such as clothing and automobiles, Goffman cites non-physical boundaries that similarly organize social behavior.

In particular, he suggests the term “**conversational preserve**” to denote a kind of non-tangible territory oriented to by conversational participants and

recognized as separate by non-participants -- as when people sitting at two different tables at a restaurant do not typically attempt to join (or even notice) each other's conversations though they may be able to hear them (and even though they may comment about them to their own conversational partners) (*Relations in Public* 1971).

When I began my own study of videotaped primary classroom interaction, I found these notions extended very well to understanding how teachers manage classrooms. Teachers help children to learn that, as students, their individual rights to active participation forms such as talking aloud depend on a complex number of factors: when, to whom, about what, how loud -- perhaps only when called upon by the teacher. Usually these constraints are noticeably different from adult-child and child-child behavior at home. Almost always, ratified student participation involves gaining ratified "access" to resources: "Access" to the teacher's attention, to the use of particular materials, to "joining" another student in his/her activity.

Relations in Public contains two chapters that are key to Goffman's paradigm for the ritual nature of language use: "The Supportive Interchange" and "The Remedial Interchange".

Briefly, a **supportive interchange** is a sequence of turns at talk in which one participant affirms his/her respect for another participant through a positive assertive act seeking mutual engagement. Typically there may be more than two **turns** in an interchange and often more than one **move** in a turn, as in this interchange of greetings:

A: Hi, How 're you doing?
B: I'm good. How about yourself?
A: Doing O.K
B: That's good.

Offers are another way of initiating a supportive interchange, and are a standard way of beginning service encounters:

Server: May I help you?
Customer: Yes. Can I have a short café latte with whole milk?

By contrast, customers who elect to act “out of normative sequence” with a preemptive request or order, presumably to speed up service, may be seen to have “undercut” the server’s prerogative to open the encounter with a supportive move; the typical result is disruption in ritual equilibrium and often a delay in transaction. In general, supportive moves seem to be favored ways of initiating smooth encounters that maintain ritual equilibrium.

By contrast, a **remedial interchange** is a sequence of turns that begins when one participant intrudes upon the personal territory of another in a negative way that “calls for” a remedial act in order to restore ritual equilibrium. When one has bumped into another person on the street, for example, an **apology** (“excuse me”, “sorry”) and possibly an **account** (“I’m getting off at this stop”) is expected to offset irritation or confrontation (“Watch what you’re doing.”). Another kind of remedial interchange begins with the remediating act itself, as in “Excuse me. Can you tell me where the nearest metro stop is?” Requests are linguistically conflated remedial forms.

Goffman followed *Relations in Public* with his widely acclaimed *Frame Analysis* in 1974, where he addresses the fluid nature of activity structures and how talk and other signifying gestures serve as framing devices for (re)interpreting “what’s going on” (to signify a “joke” or a “mistake” for example). The 1979 appearance of *Gender Advertisements* was one of the earliest studies of visual representations of gender and its socially constructed nuances (the same year in which Keith Basso published *Portraits of the Whiteman*, citing Goffman as a major influence). His last book, *Forms of Talk*, appeared in 1981 with its much cited essay “Footing,” relating individual acts (that display **social identity** and **alignment**, or **footing**) to the socially constructed **frame** for interpreting the activity; shifts in footing typically signal and invoke shifts in frame. Recent work by other scholars on “voice,” “positioning,” and “stancetaking” explores further the rich texture of “presentation of self in everyday life” today – following the analytical trail that Goffman blazed for us some three decades ago. His attention to modes and representations anticipates much of the current work on embodiment, levels of reality, and rethinking context (summarized 1983).

His final essay, “The Interaction Order,” highlights the importance he gives to “socially situated interaction” and the importance of “personal territory,” and specifically draws upon the arena of “service transactions” for key examples from the natural world of face-to-face social interaction, to

illustrate the institutionalization of “contact rituals” that undergird the maintenance of social order – especially in public spaces of everyday life.

Goffman realized well that understanding our own society was a collaborative enterprise, that our collective sensibilities were distributed, both as participants and as analysts, and that it was largely a “boot strap” operation. He respected good work on any subject and tried to learn from it. I heard him say that he never had a student from whom he didn’t learn something, and he was generous in citing their work where applicable.

His investigations were grounded in his disciplinary inquiry as a sociologist often using the ethnographic approach of anthropology. That grounding allowed him to participate fully in the collective creative collaboration (see John-Steiner 2000) of interdisciplinary work. He sequenced a bridge between the study of social interaction and the study of linguistic forms and functions, between the ethnography of communication in traditional closed communities (whose news often derived from linguistic practices that are radically different from our own) and the ethnography of communication in contemporary heterogeneous and rapidly changing social life, especially that of public places and public institutions. He gave us useful “metaconcepts.”

The resonating influence of Goffman’s work inheres in his rigorous exploration of situational parameters as they naturally occur in real life. He scrupulously reports detail to his readers and acknowledges his sources, whether personally observed, found in scholarly investigations, or as journalistic, commercial, or artful representations. He writes as an ethnographer of contemporary modern society, elucidating our realities.

Today we are still faced with Goffman’s concern that categorization by ethnicity, race, and gender do not adequately index the complexity of social identities and how they are structured in real life. The fact of complex social identities and the need for public institutions to figure out ways to accommodate to a broader range of acceptable behavior has become a crisis in many of our schools and other public settings. More now than ever, we need better understanding of the complex elements of civility in our globalizing world. (As the Native American musician Robert Mirabel remarked a decade ago, “Who doesn’t live in two worlds these days?”)

If Erving Goffman were here today, I believe he would thrill to the living energy of our passions, and urge continuing engagement with our twenty-first century moments -- including the massive ways in which new media are shaping the nature of social life (Merritt 2002). He might also remind us as we rush about the instrumentalities of modern life, that what gives social meaning to our lives inheres in pervasive ritual work that ratifies our performances, and the ritual imperatives and resources that structure the social orders of our worlds (as has been argued anew by Hall and Bucholtz 2013 since this paper was written). Erving Goffman's work remains today as relevant as ever.

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Hand-out of Summary Points to Accompany 2011 Oral Presentation:

trace intellectual pathways

cite “tidemark” concepts

twin legacies (1) *exemplary model for interdisciplinary knowledge building* and (2) *useful concepts for general study of social interaction* (with focus on educational and public settings, areas of research for which Goffman was a key advisor to me personally)

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Selected Publications of Erving Goffman:

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Cited scholarly influences:

C.W. M. Hart – strangeness and familiarity; formal and informal education
 Emile Durkheim – "sacred" and "profane" in social order and organization

"Tidemark" Interactional Terms and Concepts developed by Goffman:

deference and demeanor
 social self (as distinct from psychological self)
 social situation (interactional definition)
 gathering
 face engagement or encounter
 conversational preserve (extending concept of territory)
 supportive interchange (using moves such as greetings, offers, compliments)
 remedial interchange (using moves such as apologies, accounts, requests)
 turns as distinct from moves (using either language or gesture)
 social identity (socially constructed through interactional ritual affirmation)
 social alignment (among/between participants or interactants)
 frame ("what's going on")
 footing (the operative or invoked social identity of a participant interactant)

Cited Strategies for Compelling Qualitative Analysis:

Empirical research venues/topics selected to hold certain attributes invariant
Reanalysis of concepts introduced by other scholars or disciplines
Use of metaphor to create accessibility to a wider general readership
Ability to “extend” a concept or metaphor to find or uncover covert patterns

Attributed Key Concerns:

To better understand the nature of social organization and social order
To better understand the way in which language fits into social interaction
To better understand how individual behavior and its interpretation by others relate to structures of social interaction and larger social orders (and their maintenance) – leading to importance of (covert) ritual in everyday life
To better understand the complex affordances of print, telephone and radio, and emerging new communication technologies, and how these relate to face-to-face social interaction -- to wit, the nature of the interaction order writ large.