Frame Analysis
An Essay on the Organization of Experience.
By Erving Goffman.

When the doctor says, "How are you?" does he really want to know?

By PHILIP ROSENBERG

In a series of strikingly original, often brilliant books, Erving Goffman, a Canadian by birth who has taught at Chicago and Berkeley and at present occupies a chair in sociology and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, has exhaustively examined the petty transactions that make up everyday life. Virtually everything he writes is informed by the same kind of sociological and anthropological logic, for he delights in making us see the most simple transactions as complex and mysterious game-like strategies, and then in exposing the rules of the game to reduce the whole once again to a comprehensible simplicity. Not since Veblen laid bare the socio-economic significance of walking sticks and Pekingese dogs has there been an author capable, as Goffman is, of explaining why there are mirrors facing the counters in lunchrooms, why a man mutters an oath when he stumbles over a crack in the pavement, or why loitering, the simple act of standing still on a public sidewalk, constitutes a breach of civic order.

The small change of social intercourse obsessively fascinates Goffman because he senses instinctively the drama behind the most ordinary bits of social business—senses, that is, that what we do routinely is our "routine," our stick, our bit of stage business. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" (1959), the first of his nine books, Goffman argued that we are all essentially performers. We spend less time making things, getting and spending them, than we do making things of ourselves, of our social standing, of our own identity.

For centuries Western culture has assumed that self and society are the poles of our sense of what it is like to be alive in the world. The social world may provide us with masks to wear on public occasions, but it is comforting to feel that there are faces behind the masks, selves that remain inviolate through all contextual vicissitudes. Yet in Goffman's world this seems not to be so. In the theatrical vocabulary he uses, the term "offstage" does not occur; when we are not onstage we are backstage, and the backstage area is a theater in its own right, with its own performance standards.

Consider what happens when I am walking with a friend and am accosted by another friend with a long and sad story to tell. As I listen to the story, I give off all the conventional signs of sympathetic attention, but if an opportunity presents itself I may signal to the first friend with a gesture or glance that I am doing my best to end the conversation and move on.

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sincerity itself plays a crucial role in Trilling's work. For Goffman, sincerity plays a crucial role in "society as it is really lived." As Goffman says, an "imputation" is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a consequence of it. When the "performance" comes off, he adds, "the firm self accorded each performed character, but this performance, as Goffman says, is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a consequence of it. When the performance "comes off," he adds, "the firm self accorded each performed character will appear to emanate intrinsically from its performer."
...sincerity itself plays a curiously compromised part," Trilling observes. "Society requires of us that we present ourselves as being sincere, and the most efficacious way of satisfying this demand is to see to it that we really are sincere, that we actually are what we want our community to know we are. In short, we play the role of being ourselves, we sincerely act the part of the sincere person, with the result that a judgment can be passed upon our sincerity that it is not authentic."

And yet, after all this is said, I seem to be able to find in Goffman's work a sense of self at once more real and more substantial than might have been thought possible, a sense of self, moreover, free of the self-indulgent cant which, as Trilling points out, mars so much of the contemporary apotheosis of authenticity. To be sure, it probably would not have been possible to say this before the appearance of "Frame Analysis," Goffman's most recent book. Nor is it easy to say it even now, for while "Frame Analysis" is in many respects a welcome extension of his earlier work, it is also in some ways merely a summary and recapitulation of its author's marked tendency to cynical reductionism.

Thus, when Goffman quotes the following newspaper item, virtually without comment, one senses uneasily that at bottom a man who finds this one-sentence story meaningful must see society not merely as a staged performance but in fact as bad slapstick: "In Ciudad Juarez, Mex., two pickpockets were arrested by a policeman kneeling behind them."

For the most part, though, "Frame Analysis" rises above this sort of petty scoffery. Although the "coldness" and "remoteness" that Marshall Berman complained of in a review in these pages of Goffman's earlier books are still very much in evidence, there seems to be a new slant to his work that makes his message sensibly larger and more generous in what it has to say about human beings. In marked contrast with his earlier works, which generally purported to be about action and behavior, "Frame Analysis" is, as its subtitle announces, a study of "The Organization of Experience."

As Goffman uses it, the term "experience" carries much of its original etymological meaning: it signifies an experiment, a test, an observation of facts or events. His concern here is less with how we act or behave than with how we perceive. "I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives," he explains at the outset. "My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment." According to Goffman, our experience of reality is mediated through a system of "frames." Simply put, a "frame" is what we might in everyday language call a context or a frame of reference. The theory of frames means that human beings make the
inchoate data of reality comprehensible by locating them in intelligible contexts.

In itself, this is a banal observation, but Goffman applies it in a strikingly original way. Experience, he insists again and again, is not nearly so straightforward a thing as we commonly suppose—or rather, suppose we suppose, for deep down we are all perfectly aware of the complexity of life, especially social life. If we listen to ourselves and others carefully, as Goffman does, we cannot help noticing, for example, that our words and actions rarely can be taken at face value.

When we greet an acquaintance with "Hi, how have you been?" we are not asking for a report on his well-being. Nor are we pretending to ask for such a report. We are simply using a conventional verbal token that generally signifies an open and friendly relationship, that establishes a context or frame for the rest of our face-to-face encounter with this person. (This convention, incidentally, is so deeply ingrained that a friendly family physician may say, "How are you?" as you step into his office, but when you sit down opposite his desk he has to ask, "What's the trouble?" in order to find out how you are.)

Pushing the point a bit further, we can see that when an individual enters any given situation, he looks for the context clues that establish frame, that tell him how to take what is going on. Conversely, if the people already in the situation trap you into their world... Marcus's introduction is evocative, brilliant, wide-ranging.

-Chicago Tribune Book World

"Marvelous stories... the precision of a diamond cutter." - Walter Clemons, Newsweek

"Everything in these stories moves like an express train, with bodies clattering up the roads... There is a realness to it all, and a modern toughness. The stories trap you into their world... Marcus's intro is remarkably supple." - Richard Ward, Houston Chronicle

"The Maltese Falcon is an original. He is a master of the detective novel, yes, but also just one hell of a writer. His style is superb... Everything is relevant, built for action yet thrilling with menace, the work of a writer so in control of his medium that he has transcended it and made his detective stories into literature." - Margaret Manning, Boston Globe

"The Big Knockover" by Steven Marcus is a modern, updated version of a classic. It is relevant. Built on a solid foundation, it stands strong in its own right, as does the salesman who closes a deal in a night club. On the other hand, this last example should serve to remind us that frames can be manipulated for benign purposes, as well as sinister ones. Some salesmen may like to close deals while taking the client out on the town as a way of signifying their gratitude for his business.

Fortunately for our sanity, the exploitive manipulation of framing conventions is both dangerous to practice and difficult to maintain. Dangerous because the manipulator is in a particularly vulnerable position. If his misframing is discovered in time, the intended victim can turn the tables on him simply by going along with the game, accepting his version of reality at face value. This is what people do when they go to land-rush dinners to get the free meal. And difficult because in most cases, as soon as the manipulator gets what he wants, the frame he attempted to establish is discredited. The Sting was so much fun because Newman's and Redford's misframing not only succeeded but was never exposed. The audience who saw the movie, though, will have a reasonably good idea of how rare such durable misframings are. In most cases, the victim will retrospectively reframe the entire situation; in our night club example, that is, he not only will recognize that the evening ended up in a sale, but also will come to feel that was a sales pitch "all along."

Note here that the phrase "all along" is almost always used in an accusatory sense and refers exclusively to the fact that an exploitive misframing has been unmasked. An index of how seriously we take the charge of framing violations is the fact that we would almost always prefer to be thought guilty of opportunism than of frame manipulation. Thus a person will be willing to admit that he has taken advantage of a situation if this admission leaves him in a position to deny that this was what he had in mind "all along."

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A Tragedy in the Living Room

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