

UNIVERSITY of PENNSYLVANIA

PHILADELPHIA 19104

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY MUSEUM F1
33rd and Spruce Streets

October 1, 1931

Dear Bob:

I read your paper on last resorts when it came out and almost wrote you about it, but felt somehow that that might not be right. As I read it I wished I had had a chance to see the manuscript so as to argue some points; perhaps next time. In any case, thanks; the paper raises and develops some lovely points.

Obviously (when you point it out) last resorts is a way of seeing and presenting things, and not things themselves. Given that, four queries:

- 1) (P. 15) Why does the actor have to be perceived as responsible before action against him can be accounted for in last resort terms? Parents who finally give up trying to house mentally defective or psychotically active children sometimes rely on non-responsibility ("like an animal") as part of the excuse.
- 2) If there is a sequence of increasingly stringent negative sanctions available (actually and not merely perceptually) might not the last resorts framework be induced as it were by arrival at the last normal sanction, or one that is discontinually more stringent than the prior one? (The step between life sentence and death penalty can be argued to be, given all of our culture, an objectively discontinuous jump, and therefore one perhaps prone to acquire last resort definitions.
- 3) If "last resort" is a standard cultural out, then surely there must be a family of equivalent phrases that are employable to signal and accomplish the same definitional work. It is, surely, unlikely that important self-definitional work would be tied to merely one lexical locution.
- 4) The deeper point of the article, one could take it, is not that last resorts are interpretive-accounting acts, but that they remind us that control agents operate in the system of agents that control them, and that these others may, for example, oblige the sanctioner to be humane and loyal to his relationships. And the point where last resort arguments are made may really be the point where these others have to be answered to, this in turn being a point where sanctioning action hits the fan as it were and can be contained within a given informational circle. Thus, for example, in the case of the mental upset not only the patient has a moral career but the next-of-relation has one too. And last resort action here would seem to mark the point where actions taken against the culprit raise doubt on the part of the control agent's others, so indeed, it could be argued, while last resort arguments are a definitional defense, in some cases they are anything but an arbitrary selection. Families differ tremendously in terms of the point at which they give up and seek institutional support in managing

the symptom-carrier, and the last resort imagery gives them a way of presenting their institutionally-oriented action once they decide to take it. But it could be argued it is the movement outside of the family and not the imagery itself that leaves them suddenly in need of an accounting. An even more striking case, I believe, is the movement out of the household into an apartment at the point of marital separation.

Again thanks. Keep in touch.


Erving Goffman

(Dictated but not read.)

EG/vu

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The College

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
University Museum
33rd and Spruce Streets

January 14, 1970

Mr. Alexander J. Morin
Aldine Publishing Company
529 South Wabash Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60605

Dear Alex:

Thanks for your kind note on my favor. Obviously, I have all kinds of doubts and concerns about it and it is nice to get some assurances.

The volume by Emerson on judging delinquents came. It is a really nice job. Lots of people apply interaction analysis but almost no one demonstrates that it is worth applying; that is what pleases me about the book. If you see him, tell him I would be happy to write letters anywhere for him.

Regards,



Erving Goffman

EG/lac