Erving Goffman, 60, author, scholar of the social sciences

By Mark Wagenfeld

Erving Goffman, 60, a renowned sociologist and student of human motivation, died Saturday at Pennsylvania Hospital. He was the immediate past president of the American Sociological Association, and since 1968 had held the Benjamin Franklin chair of anthropology and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Mr. Goffman developed the theory that the social imperative to impress other people was the single most driving factor in human emotion.

Alice Rossi, the current president of the American Sociological Association, recalled that Mr. Goffman had had a "very important influence on two generations of researchers and students."

A colleague at Penn, Ivar Berg, the chairman of the sociology department, said, "It is hard to imagine any sociologist anywhere in the world whose work is more likely to endure than Erving Goffman's. He has had enormous influence on scholars in the field of folklore, anthropology, sociology, social psychology and cultural anthropology. I would find it difficult to think of any scholar in this generation who has had a bigger impact through his teachings and writing across the breadth of the social sciences."

Mr. Goffman paid great attention to small aspects of human behavior and identified hidden codes of behavior in everyday situations. In Forms of Talk, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award in 1981, Mr. Goffman wrote that even the most innocuous act may be calculated to show a person in a favorable light to his audience.

A New York Times review of the book described Mr. Goffman as "a writer who brings mordant irony to the pretensions and theatricality of everyday interaction."

One of his works, The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life, has been translated into 10 languages. His other books include Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity; Behaviors in Public Places; Relations in Public, and Asylums: Essays on the Social Situations of Mental Patients and Other Inmates.

The latter work was based on Mr. Goffman's observations in field studies of mental hospitals while with the visiting scientists program at the Laboratory for Social and Environmental Studies at the National Institute of Mental Health. Its publication resulted in his being named, in 1971, to a panel of scholars established to study involuntary confinement in mental hospitals, reform schools and prisons.

For Mr. Goffman, the individual was never a passive reservoir of other people's attitudes and conclusions. Rather, he contended, the individual actively creates impressions designed to win self-appraisals he feels are positive and valuable.

The individual, he wrote, does not simply learn about himself from others, he creates and recreates himself through others, with the self being a variable construction created to meet the demands of varying social situations.

Other works included Gender Advertisements, an examination of the ways in which, he said, women are "saved from seriousness" by advertising, and Frame Analysis, in which he said, "a self or a personality is an abstraction, a self-defensive argument, a careful selection from a multitude of facts."

Mr. Goffman, who was born in Alberta, Canada, received his doctoral degree from the University of Chicago in 1958. His graduate work included a stay in the Shetland Islands, where he observed a community of sheep raisers.

He came to Penn in 1968 after having been full professor of sociology at the University of California at Berkeley. He lived in Center City.

He received numerous academic honors, including membership in the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He was chosen president of the American Sociological Association in 1971.

Surviving are his wife, Gillian Sanhoff, the graduate chairman of the department of linguistics at Penn; a son, Thomas Edward Goffman, of Washington, and a daughter, Alice.

A private memorial service will be held at 9 a.m. today in the rare book room of the Van Pelt Library on the university campus.

By WILLIAM DICKE

Erving Goffman, a sociologist who searched for the meaning in the routine transactions of everyday life, died Friday in Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia, after a long illness. He was 60 years old.

Dr. Goffman, the Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, argued in a number of books that even seemingly innocuous social acts could be calculated to show an individual in the best light. People are essentially performers whose main business is fabricating an identity, he argued.

Geoffrey Nunberg of Stanford University, reviewing Dr. Goffman's book, "Forms of Talk" in The New York Times Book Review last year, said that the sociologist had acquired a wide audience because he brought "a mordant irony to the pretensions and theatricality of everyday interaction."

Called an 'Important Influence'

Alice Rossi, president of the American Sociological Association, said that Dr. Goffman was a "very important influencer on two generations of researchers and students."


Erving Goffman was born June 11, 1922, in Philadelphia. He is survived by his wife, Gillian Sanhoff, his daughter, Alice. Funeral services will be private.