

8-1-2008

Goffman's Biography and the Interaction Order: A Study in Biocritical Hermeneutics

Dmitri N. Shalin

University of Nevada, Las Vegas, shalin@unlv.nevada.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives



Part of the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Shalin, D. N. (2008). Goffman's Biography and the Interaction Order: A Study in Biocritical Hermeneutics. In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-39.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/79

This Monograph is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Monograph in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Monograph has been accepted for inclusion in Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Goffman's Biography and the Interaction Order: A Study in Biocritical Hermeneutics

Dmitri N. Shalin

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Boston, August 1, 2008.

In these matters, American Hippies, and later, "The Chicago Seven," were interesting amateurs; the great terrorists of contact forms were the mid-17th century Quakers of Britain. . . . That sturdy band of plain speakers should always stand before us as an example of the wonderfully disruptive power of systematic impoliteness, reminding us once again of the vulnerabilities of the interaction order. There is no doubt: Fox's disciples raised to the monumental heights the art of becoming the pain in the ass.

Erving Goffman

If we list the various claims (both substantiated and the other kind) that have been made against Goffman – cynical, ironical, duplicitous, deceptive, unserious, nonresponsive – we find they are also the key terms in Sartre's analysis of 'bad faith'. It seems that Goffman took Sartre so much to heart that he assembled a persona for himself exactly on the model of 'Sartrean bad faith', perhaps in the belief that a double negative makes a positive, that is, if he could only mock up bad faith maybe he, at least, could escape the determinism he describes so well. Certainly there is evidence in his comportment that Goffman was more concerned than anyone else about the implications of his theory.

Dean MacCannell

Introduction

This paper examines the interfaces between Erving Goffman's biography and theory. It rests on the premise that Goffman's *Behavior in Public Places* can be profitably explored in light of Goffman's behavior in public places, and vice versa. The tentative conclusion I have reached after examining available biographical accounts is that Goffman was a student of civility whose standards he flouted, that his demeanor was sometimes intentionally demeaning, his deference willfully deferred, and his incivility painfully obvious to those present. The argument is made that Goffman's infringements on the interaction order were strategic, systematic, theoretically significant, and worthy of close study by interactionist sociologists.

Exploratory in nature, this study is designed to make the case for biocritical hermeneutics – an offshoot of pragmatist sociology that focuses on the embodied social forms and biographical underpinnings of sociological inquiry (Shalin 2007). It uses the resources of the *Intercyberlibrary* (see the reference section for URL), an online collection highlighting the works and avocational pursuits of interactionist sociologists. The library houses *The Erving Goffman Project* that features biographical materials on Goffman and promotes biographical methods in social science.

After situating the present venture in a larger body of scholarship on the interfaces of biography and social science, I review the biographical sources available for this study and examine the difficulties in applying biographical methods to Goffman's work. Next, I analyze the (dis)continuities in Goffman the scholar, the teacher, the man, and discuss their implications for the interaction order theory. I conclude with a few thoughts on *The Erving Goffman Project* and the prospects for biocritical research.

Biographical Research and Pragmatist Hermeneutics

There is a long-standing tradition in social science that investigates the relationship between biography and society. In the last two decades, social scientists have increasingly focused on the interplay between biographical narratives and the larger social context within

which members of society seek self-understanding. Dan Goodley and his associates go as far as to label our time “a biographical age” (Goodley et al, 2004; see also Petrovskaya 2003; Roberts 2002; Shanahan and Macmillan 2008; Zissner 2004). We can glean this biographical turn in the rapidly expanding list of published biographies, the emergence of web sites devoted to biographical research and book stores specializing in biographical materials.

Social scientists working in this tradition converge on the premise that society’s history unfolds through the ongoing self-construction of its members while (auto)biographical accounts draw on the narrative constructs and life-cycle resources available in a given historical period. While biographical explorations focus on biographical and autobiographical statements circulating in various social strata, they are less centrally concerned with the embodied forms of self-framing and the word-body-action nexus.

The problem with self-construction is that it is subject to self-sampling error inherent in sampling by anecdote and validation through hearsay. Present in all biographical narratives, this difficulty is particularly evident in autobiographical reconstructions whose protagonists rummage through their own lives looking for episodes that express the author’s evolving sense of agency. The reader is usually left uncertain as to how representative a given sample of anecdotes is, how the incongruent strands of enselfments hang together and whether they form a coherent whole. The inauspicious biographical events can be cast as older selves the agent passed through on the way to an authentic selfhood (St. Augustine’s youthful indiscretions), explained away as uncharacteristic slips (Mel Gibson moments), or edited out altogether as ill-suited for the chosen narrative arc (Nixon’s animosity toward Jews).

Biocritical hermeneutics, by contrast, examines self-framing as a somatic-affective-discursive process marked by indeterminacy and creativity, and it goads us to track the widest possible range of enselfments found in a given agent or a group inhabiting a particular socio-historical niche (Shalin 2007). Starting with the premise that social scientists draw on their personal experience

when they select problems for investigation and articulate their research experience, biocritical inquiry highlights what the ancients called *bios theoretikos*– a life informed by principles and principles embodied in life. Special attention is paid here to the manner in which historical agents integrate their *vita activa*, *vita contemplativa*, and *vita voluptuosa*. Biocritique samples the agent’s discursive tokens, emotional offerings, and behavioral assays in an attempt to figure out how they hang together, what a given theoretical precept means in practical terms. All along, the biocritical researcher remains mindful about the ever-changing gap between our words, emotions, and deeds.

This perspective differs from the constitutive principles of psychology insofar as the latter postulates a core personality persisting across time and space. Rather, biocritical hermeneutics focuses on the patterns of uncertainty and structures of indeterminacy manifest in human conduct continuously adjusted to social pressures and revealing human agency as the inexorably stochastic process (Shalin 1986:22). An observation by Michel Montaigne, who explored his own life in a series of brilliant essays conceived as quasi-experiments, illuminates this perspective human agency:

[A]ny one who turns his prime attention on to himself will hardly ever find himself in the same state twice. . . . Every sort of contradiction can be found in me, depending on some twist or attribute: timid, insolent; chaste, lecherous; talkative, taciturn; tough, sickly; clever, dull; brooding, affable; lying, truthful; learned, ignorant; generous, miserly and then prodigal – I can see something of all that in myself, depending on how I gyrate; and anyone who studies himself attentively finds in himself and in his very judgment this whirring about and this discordancy. There is nothing I can say about myself as a whole simply and completely, without intermingling and admixture. The most universal article of my own Logic is DISTINGUO (Montaigne 1987:377).

Biocritical investigation starts with the premise that we gain knowledge about ourselves and society when we examine systematically the (mis)alignment between our words, actions, and

emotions, along with the work done to realign our word-body-action nexus. Biocritical hermeneutics invites a judicious second look at the fragments from which the master narratives spring with an eye to reconstructing a historically situated agency in its full stochastic flight. Biocritical research relies on a kind of “reverse editing” that restores the redacted enselfments and reframes the overall self-construction by cross-referencing the agent’s programmatic commitments with the available biographical records of their actions, feelings, and words. By collecting biographical data and subjecting it to biocritical analysis, we can better understand how affectively ambivalent and situationally ambiguous occasions are framed into ready-to-hand accounts which, in turn, feed back into our conduct and emotion work.

Epistemologically, biocritical hermeneutics takes its cue from early Heidegger who stressed the link between our moods and theoretical practices. “It is precisely when we see the ‘world’ unsteady and fitfully in accordance with our moods, that the ready-to-hand shows itself in its specific moodhood, which is never the same from day to day. . . . Yet even the purest theoria has not left all moods behind it. . . . Indeed from the ontological point of view we must as a general principle leave the primary discovery of the world to ‘bare moods’” (1962:177). This bold premise calls for a reexamination of the link between affect and discursive practices. It also invites a fresh look at the hermeneutical circle which, as Heidegger (1962:195) warned us, “is not to be reduced to the level of vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated, [for in this] circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing.” I take this to mean that, consciously or unconsciously, we insert ourselves into the hermeneutical circle and bring our affections and deeds into a social inquiry (Shalin 2007:220-221). Our theoretical constructs draw on the somatic-affective experience we bring to the research situation, just as the insights gleaned from the situation under study brings about reconstruction in our experience.

Goffman’s methodological stance echoes this agenda. We can see that in a talk that Goffman (2002) gave at the 1974 Pacific Sociological Association meeting where he described participant

observation as a way of “getting data . . . by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever. . . . That ‘tunes your body up’ and with your ‘tuned-up body’ and with the ecological right to be close to them (which you obtained by one sneaky means or another), you are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily response to what’s going on about them and you are empathetic enough because you have been taking the same crap they were taking – to sense what it is that they’re responding to” (Goffman 2002:125-126). Such statements highlight the corporeal dimension and the empathetic nature of ethnographic inquiry. First articulated by Charles Cooley (1909:27; Shalin 1986:18-22), this precept reminds us that the line separating the subject and object in ethnographic research is less than bright. Field researchers gain knowledge by making local experiences their own, or as Goffman put it, “[Y]ou should feel you could settle down and forget about being a sociologist. The members of the opposite sex should become attractive to you. You should be able to engage in the same body rhythms, rate of movement, tapping of the feet, that sort of thing, as the people around you. Those are the real tests of penetrating a group” (Goffman 2002:129). Sharing one’s experience with the locals, bringing it to bear on the interpretation process is the reverse part of the same process, which demands more attention than it was given in Goffman’s work.

The circle involved in this reasoning is not vicious but hermeneutical. Seen from the vantage point of pragmatist philosophy, the hermeneutical circle draws into itself the researcher’s body and engages the participant observer’s emotions. This is what Goffman appears to be going through when he put himself imaginatively in place of a con artist, an asylum patient, a stigmatized person, an undercover agent, a gambler hooked on risk taking, a lecturer staging a performance before an audience, or an association’s president preparing a talk he knows could be delivered only posthumously. Participant observation pivots on self-reflexivity, on the ability to take the role of the

other. It also problematizes the scholar's biographical experience, revealing the hermeneutical horizons within which the inquirer practices sociological imagination. Such a stance can be traitorous, especially when practiced unwittingly, for it lures the inquiring agent into a historically grounded hermeneutical circle where it may "discover" exactly what it expects to find. But this hermeneutical circle also contains what Heidegger called "a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing."

Having being drawn into the pragmatically understood hermeneutical circle, the biocritic will face a host of ethical challenges. Which information about the researcher's private life should remain private and which belongs to public domain? What if a scholar under biocritical scrutiny made special effort – as Erving Goffman did – to insulate his or her backstage from public scrutiny? How far should we go protecting the innocent (or not so innocent) third parties from appearing in less than flattering lights? How do we go about linking biographical tidbits to research practices and theoretical constructions?

I now turn to the challenges confronting biocritical researchers and biographical resources available to students of Goffman's life and work.

The Ethics of Biocritical Exploration

Those who have studied Goffman's work observed a puzzling feature underlying his research practice: the man who peered intently into other people's backstage regions fiercely protected from scrutiny his own backstage. As Judith Posner (2000:99-100) noted, "it seems strange when one realizes that while positing a reflective or introspective model of social behavior in his social analysis, [Goffman] has generally been so singularly non-reflective about himself. . . . While he does not 'give' many messages about himself," Posner continues, "he clearly 'gives them off'." Goffman may inveigh against the "touching tendency to keep a part of the world safe from sociology" (Goffman 1972:152), but that does not mean he is willing to bring himself into the picture, whether as a researcher talking about his fieldwork practices or as a human being

squaring off with his own interactive strategies.

"Goffman was very secretive about his personal life," Fine, Manning, and Smith (2000:x) remind us in their extensive review of Goffman's work. "[T]he executor of Goffman's estate, abiding by his wishes, has closed his personal records to those who would investigate his life," confirms Jaworski (2000:299). Yves Winkin, a sociologist who made a concerted effort to study Goffman's biography, corroborates this point: "In Goffman's case, it was clear that his privacy was jealously guarded. He never gave interviews to the media, he never allowed his publishers to release pictures of him and he never appeared on television. In November 1983, when I approached Gillian Sankoff, his widow and literary executor, I was politely acknowledged but was given no overt help (such as access to the archives). . . . As Gillian Sankoff explained to me, Goffman wanted to keep his life totally separate from his work" (Winkin 1999:19-20). But can a scholar really keep one's life completely separate from one's work?

The case was made to me on occasion by those who knew Goffman personally that his work stands or falls on its own, that in-depth knowledge of his personal life cannot help us build on Goffman's insights and carry on his sociological tradition. Moreover, interest in the scholar's personal life risks turning prurient. Vladimir Shlapentokh, an émigré Russian scholar who visited Goffman in Philadelphia and left a glowing account of that meeting, told me upon learning the nature of my interest:

By many accounts, Dostoyevsky was a miserable man – mendacious, dishonest, prickly. But as a reader, I can enjoy his books without going into his biography. Indeed, I can enjoy his work all the better if I remain ignorant of his earthy self. My wife Liuda read a recent [controversial] biography of [Boris] Pasternak, and she loved it. But I refused to read it. I am sure it is well written, but for me Pasternak is just a poet. . . . As it turned out, my beloved Shopen was an anti-Semite. So was [Franz] List. Should I enjoy their music any less because of that? (Shlapentokh 2008).

But there also is a body of opinion which rejects the notion that “nothing good can come from prying into people’s private lives, reading their correspondence, and interviewing their friends” (Jaworski 2000:299). According to Winkin, “Once Goffman became a public figure he was, whether he chose to admit it or not, dispossessed of himself and of his privacy” (Winkin 1999:20). In the same spirit, P.S. Strong lists several lessons Goffman bequeathed to us, one of which bears on the propriety of treating the researcher’s life as a resource: “[Y]ou can treat your own life as data. Each one of us is a natural control group; if our splendidly universal theories don’t even apply to our own lives, there must be something wrong with them. . . . To treat one’s entire life as data is at one and the same time to dedicate oneself entirely to the discipline; to relentlessly combat ‘that touching tendency to keep a part of the world safe from sociology’ and to treat the whole life, including sociology, its works and homilies, as a resource for intellectual exploration” (Strong 2000:42, 41).

I share these sentiments. An inquiry into Goffman’s life and work strikes me as both legitimate and instructive. Goffman is no candidate for sainthood, and I am not the devil’s advocate, just a researcher wondering if Goffman’s life can shed light on his dramaturgical sociology, and vice versa. We can learn the strengths and weaknesses of sociological dramaturgy by examining how Erving conducted his research and signed himself in the flesh. Clearly, we need to exercise the abundance of caution conducting a biocritical inquiry, handling information that Erving Goffman and those close to him might consider privileged. As co-director of the *International Biography Initiative* (see the reference section for URL), I grapple with such issues when I prepare for publication interviews recorded over the course of years with Russian social scientists and intellectuals. Even when respondents gave every indication that their interviews or memoirs should enter the public domain, the question persists whether frank opinions and intimate details that surface in their narratives should be kept away from the public. Those compiling an autobiography confront a similar set of narrative problems and ethical dilemmas. Which biographical materials are to be redacted, how closely the edited truth must resemble messy realities, when the account offered to

the public becomes self-serving, what is the proper balance of tact and frankness, of an overarching narrative unity and jarring self-revelations? Interviews and memoirs posted on the *International Biography Initiative* site are highly illuminating in this respect. They show that Russian scholars seeking to reconcile their perestroika selves with their earlier soviet incarnations sometime willfully omit key events that cast their past identities and subsequent metamorphoses in more ambiguous light (Shalin 2006, 2008).

Ives Winkin (1999:20) asks, “[D]o I have the right to invade his [Goffman’s] privacy?” The answer is “yes,” provided the researcher is “well-intentioned as good literary standards permit. There should be no stature crafting, but equally there should be no unnecessary unwrapping either” (Winkin 1999:20). That does not sound like much of an advice (how much unwrapping is too much?) for those wading through the muddy waters of biocritique. Still, we should heed the common sense appeal to tact.

Be clear about your inquiry’s goal, highlight alternative interpretations, explore the potential sources of bias, consider the best and worst case scenarios, do as little harm as possible to the third parties, pay close attention to the historical circumstances and the ethical standards of the time – such are ethical guideposts I propose to follow in this biocritical inquiry. We also need to bear in mind that biocritical accounts may reveal as much about the biocritic as about the object of biocritical investigation.

Biographical Resources for the Erving Goffman Project

One potential payoff from the Erving Goffman Project and the materials gathered in the *Intercyberlibrary* is that they force us to think systematically about the difficulties we encounter in evaluating the veracity and relevance of biographical data. Much of what is available to biocritical researchers are second-hand accounts with unclear provenance. Personal archives tend to be edited, sometimes heavily, to prevent the particularly unseemly information from reaching the posterity. When the memoirist witnessed the reported event first-hand, the exact circumstances surrounding the

encounter often remain obscure. Witnesses neglect to describe the nature of their relationship with the person they reminisce about. While conducting interviews and collecting memoirs for this project, I have also noticed that when I had a chance to talk to the same person twice, the informant occasionally offered discrepant, even contradictory, renderings of the same events. The biocritics' personal biases, the way they hear, record, and interpret the bio data, may further prejudice the story.

It is all the more impressive when the memoirist provides the relevant particulars, explains the extent of one's familiarity with the person in question, and discloses the potential sources of bias. A good example is Robert Erwin who provides this brief but telling account of his encounters with Goffman:

I base my opinion of Goffman's personality on three conversations I had with him as a publisher between 1967 and 1979, on a couple of casual social encounters, and on stories told me by two friends and a person who dealt with him on academic business.

A number of people who knew him in person referred to him as sour and sardonic, although a minority objected to those labels. The word I would use to characterize his personality is eerie.

During a year he spent at the Harvard Center for International Affairs, where I was then Editor of Publications, Goffman enrolled a child at the Cambridge school which one of my daughters was attending.

One sunny Saturday at a fund-raising fair at the school I discovered that the jazz quartet playing outside the Science Building included Edmond Hall, the superb Dixieland clarinetist. Hall was old and down on his luck by the look of him, but he still had fast fingers and a mahogany tone.

Goffman came ambling along while I was listening. As we carried on small talk about the fair, the school, and our offspring, I nodded and beamed at the music, making no secret of my exultation and veneration. The more enthusiasm I showed, the more Goffman looked at me with dread, and in a little while he left like a miner escaping from a tunnel that may collapse at any minute.

Maybe I was ingenuous. Maybe he was tone deaf. Yet I could not help but think of the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz, the one who would melt if you splashed water at her. Dread is not too strong a word for what I felt in him. He seemed to fear that to be splattered with joy would be lethal. (Erwin 2000:94)

This reportage tells a story as well as provides the sense of time and place. Most tales of Goffman circulating in the discipline are less specific. It is left to the researcher to investigate the distribution of reported episodes, examine the possible reporting bias, and identify specific framing devices used to capture lived experience. In other cases, the information about a particular episode comes second hand but the provider is fully aware of this fact, cites the source, and even offers a clue on how to verify the account. The following example comes from Joel Best's interview:

The guy's name is Alan Charles Kors, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a big advocate for academic freedom, a professor studying the Enlightenment. He told me a story about having gone to a dinner party where Goffman just eviscerated the hostess, saying something like, 'Here are all those important people you gathered here – is this the best that you can do?' I don't remember all the details (Best 2007).

We must exercise an abundance of caution dealing with hearsay, but it would be a mistake to disregard it altogether. Much of what reaches us through history is just that. We need to collate biographical tidbits from the sources of different provenance and veracity. Even though such accounts may not rise above the level of hearsay, they offer valuable information. This is how Lofland introduces the materials gathered for his fine biographical essay on Goffman:

As is well known, Goffman was a complicated man who grew even more Gordian as he matured. I knew only parts of him and in preparing for this gathering I have thought it important to seek the reflections of others who knew him and his work, the better to present a more complete and textured picture of his legacies. With their permission, I drew frequently on the discerning and enlarging observations they have shared. Their contributions are too

important to relegate recognition to a footnote and I therefore indicate their names and my appreciation here: Howard S. Becker, Bennett Berger, Herbert Blumer, Arlene Daniels, Fred Davis, Jason Ditton, Russell R. Dynes, Gary Allan Fine, William J. Good, Allen Grimshaw, Joseph Gusfield, Gary Hamilton, Arlie Hochschild, Dell Hymes, John Irwin, Edwin Lemert, Lyn H. Lofland, Peter K. Manning, Gary Marx, Marsha Rosenbaum, Anselm Strauss, and Harold Wilensky. Despite their help, I surely select and elaborate those legacies that are most congenial to me and in which I believe most strongly. I am certain that others would (and surely will) select and stress different inheritances (Lofland 2000/1983:156).

It would be valuable indeed to collect all known tales of Goffman, including the raw interview data. Assembled, double-checked, and cross-referenced, such data repository can yield a multi-dimensional portrait of Goffman the scholars, the teacher, the man. As the work on the Erving Goffman Project lumbers along, it might be helpful to distinguish between

1. **Hearsay** – tales about the person floating around without clear attribution.

2. **Anecdotes** – stories traced to a particular source but not necessarily witnessed by the narrator.

3. **Episodes** – single events witnessed by a narrator who did not play a major part in the encounter.

4. **Encounters** – an interaction in which the narrator engaged in a focused interchange with the person in question.

5. **Transactions** – a series of direct and indirect encounters stretching over a course of time and hinting at a pattern.

6. **Reputations** – opinions about the person's agency formed by specific narrators on the basis of personal observations, second hand accounts, and partial record.

7. **Evaluations** – considered biocritical judgments about an

embodied historical agent based on the personal accounts, institutional records, and other traces that the agent or a group of agents left behind.

We might also need a term like **biographical repertoires** to describe a range of biographical blueprints that gain currency in a historical group, strata, society, or era. The notion of “biographem” (see Winkin 1999) suggests additional lines for biocritical investigation. A specific tale may not fall squarely into either category, spanning several framing models, but the above schema might help assess its generic features.

The would-be contributors to the Erving Goffman Project who witnessed Erving personally and have a tale to share can shed light on his physical appearance (e.g., estimates of Erving’s heights range between 5.2 and 5.6), his demeanor (e.g., his eagerness to reveal the other’s and conceal his own backstage), manner of dress (e.g., some remember him as a dapper, deliberate dresser while others recall him being casual about his clothes), as well as specific deeds that show the widest possible range of his enselfments (e.g., is the story about Goffman’s pointing to the inferiority of female grad student apocryphal?).

Those interested in biocritical research on Erving Goffman have several sources at their disposal. My own study draws heavily on the memoirs about Erving Goffman collected in volume one of the series edited by G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith (2000). Particularly valuable for the present endeavor were the biographical materials and interpretations gleaned from Lofland (2000/1983), Marx (2000/1984), MacCannell (2000/1983), and Winkin (1988, 1999, 2000/1992) – scholars who knew Goffman well and made an effort to link his life and work. I found plenty of insights into Goffman’s corpus and its socio-historical underpinnings in the works of Berger (2000/1973), Gouldner (2000/1970), Hymes (2000/1984), Grimshaw (2000/1983), Strong (2000/1983), Posner (2000/1978), Fine (2000/1999), Greelan (2000/1984), Erwin (2000/1992), and Gonos (1980).

This project also uses the interviews and memoirs I collected from

Goffman's students, colleagues, and friends whose reminiscences are gathered in the *Intercyberlibrary*. Several interviews I recorded with those who knew Goffman are yet to be transcribed, edited, and posted on the web. I wish to express my gratitude to Patti Adler, Howard Becker, Hans Becker, Joel Best, James Chriss, David Dickens, Gary Fine, Andy Fontana, David Franks, Ruth Horowitz, John Irwin, Melvin Kohn, John Lofland, Peter Manning, Gary Marx, Dean MacCannell, George Ritzer, Vladimir Shlapentokh, Alan Sica, Loic Waquant, and other scholars who responded to my initial inquiries and passed on to me their reminiscences about Erving Goffman.

The Many Facets of Goffman's Identity

Goffman left an indelible impression on those who encountered him personally. Everybody has something positive to say about Goffman the scholar, the teacher, the man. He is remembered as "gentle" (Hymes 2000:59), "unusually modest" (Strong 2000:42), "kindly, hospitable" (Shlapentokh 2008), "a warm, friendly, modest, considerate man" (Bourdieu, 2000:4), "a steadfast and loyal friend . . . charming, clear, and sympathetic" (Grimshaw 2000:6), "hip, existential, cool . . . brilliant and learned" (Marx 2000:63-67), a "cheerful and graceful analyst in a world of tragedy and melancholy" (Lofland 2000:176), a scholar with a rare "genius for close observation" (MacCannell 2000:11).

Even though most of these statements were first published as a tribute to Goffman immediately following his death and so are appropriately hagiographic, they hint at a different Goffman: a "snide or disparaging individual" (Irwin 2007), "a complicated man who grew ever more Gordian as he matured," who "could be so exquisitely cruel" (Lofland 2000:156, 175), an "unusually complex [man with] a painful shyness which made him reject, sometimes rudely, strangers' attempts at encounter initiation" (Grimshaw 2000:6), "a detached, hard-boiled, intellectually cynic . . . mercurial character [with] the ability to shift selves," a man showing "an almost sadistic pleasure in shaking up the reader or listener" and a weakness for "metaphors, which . . . in retrospect . . . seem cruel

and tasteless" (Marx 2000:63-69), a man issuing a "steady stream of sarcasm" which earned him the nickname "little dagger" (Fine, Manning, and Smith 2000:x-xii).

As Dean MacCannell put it, "Goffman was both friendly, modest, and considerate – and he could be mean as hell" (MacCannell 2007). People who knew Goffman well have sought to reconcile such contradictory strands in Goffman's enselfments and explain their admiration for the man. Says John Irwin, "Even though Erving could be a pain in the ass and sometimes cruel, my wife and I loved him because he was so smart, fascinating, entertaining, and occasionally kind" (Irwin, 2007). Gary Marx invokes the image of "at least two Goffmans. One was wise, warm, and of good humor, eager to impart knowledge via morality tales and specific advice and make the student feel like he or she was within the chosen circle of person in the know. . . . The other Goffman was controlled, insensitive, and indifferent and made sure the student knew his place. Most of the 'Tales of Goffman' are negative. In many of his dealings with others he did not reflect the sensitivity and concern for the underdog shown in his early written work" (Marx 2000:67). John Lofland captures "dialectical contradictions" in Goffman's presentation of self especially well:

He was a severe formal theorist yet a descriptive ethnographer; a reclusive scholar yet an adroit administrator and a rapier-witted party-goer; cynical yet sincere; an intellectual giant yet skeptical about his achievements; openly crass in promoting his self-interest yet rejecting broad and public self-promotion; brilliant at ferreting out social bluffs yet less than adept at bluffing; religious about scholarship yet cynical about social enterprises. Most certainly he stripped away polite fictions in print and in person, yet also in print and in person had the deepest and most profound appreciation of the importance of 'tact, graciousness, and compassion" (Lofland 2000:176).

Why would the man who is supposed to have acted "out of loyalty to all the beautiful losers who never made it" (Berger 2000:289) tell an assistant professor just denied tenure: "After all, all of us aren't good enough to teach here" (Lofland 2000:167). Those familiar

with the account of “cooling the mark out” that Goffman gave in his famous 1952 article will be puzzled by this heedless violation of the interaction order. Was the incident misreported? Did Goffman’s colleague do something to provoke this outrage? Perhaps the remark was delivered in a humorous fashion that reframed its meaning? On the face of it, such behavior has more to do with “heating the mark up” than with “cooling the mark out.”

How could a scholar speaking so eloquently about the cruel way society stigmatizes its members tell a female student that “he did not think women should be in graduate school” or pointedly use derogatory terms like “gimps” when “there was a badly crippled woman in the class” (Marx 2000:67). Notice that it was the same Goffman who published pioneering studies like *Stigma* (1963), “The Arrangements between the Sexes” (1977), and *Gender Advertisements* (1979). It is hard to think Goffman was unaware of how his speech acts must have affected the people he stigmatized. Then, what was the pedagogical meaning of his harangues?

What are we to make of an incident reported by Tom Scheff when he got sick on the airplane and tried discretely to do what nature required while “Goffman was laughing and narrating a blow-by-blow description of my behavior, describing my attempts to be polite as I was overcome by an irresistible impulse. I felt doubly humiliated, not just because of my behavior, but also because I felt Goffman had mocked me” (Scheff 2006:10). No effort to save face on Goffman’s part in this episode. So what was the purpose of such conduct – hazing the underling, testing the novice, teaching a lesson about civil inattention?

Or consider a report about Goffman passing through a hotel lobby at a sociology convention and casually remarking to a group of friends: “If I can’t find anybody more important to talk with, I’ll come back and talk with you’. A jaunty terrorist with a diffident voice reminding us that in this world’s bag full-to-bursting with banal sentiment,” observes Bennett Berger (2000:279), “anybody who says something cruel and true can’t be all bad.” “Rendering explicit the contraption,” as Victor Shklovsky called it, would seem to be the subtext of this incident.

Here is one more example illuminating the persistent self-referentiality in Goffman's conduct. It comes from Goffman's "lecture about lecture" delivered at the University of Michigan in 1976 where he mocked a typical lecturer who "in exchange for this song and dance, this stage-limited performance of approachability, this illusion of personal access . . . gets honor, attention, applause and a fee. For which I thank you" (Goffman 1983c:194).

We should bear in mind that participants often have different takes on the same events, with each account having some perchance on reality. Also, there is probably a sampling bias in all memoir literature that tends to focus on the spectacular, the offbeat, and the negative and underreport the routine, the mundane, and the benign. Here is a recollection by David Dickens, (2008) that shows Goffman's different sides:

During my last year of graduate school, in 1977 or 1978, I presented a paper on phenomenological sociology at a conference in Boston. The session was chaired by Larry Wieder, a prominent ethnomethodologist. Once the presentations concluded, a small unassuming man walked up to me, shook my hand and told me "I really enjoyed your paper. It was very clear." I thanked him and he then turned toward Larry, whom he seemed to know, and said "Larry, I didn't understand a word you said." Wieder, being the kind fellow that he was, simply chuckled and said, "Well, Erving, I'm sorry to hear that." I still had no idea who the stranger was but, as he turned and walked away, Larry looked at me and said, "you should be very proud, that was Erving Goffman."

As this example shows, Goffman could be supportive and dismissive at the same time. And he clearly showed the capacity for growth, both intellectually and personally. Goffman might have been skeptical about women's work in graduate school at the early stages of his career but later wrote papers on gender discrimination and institutional reflexivity, which must have been prompted in part by his reflections on his own role as a professor in the academe dominated by males. He castigated mental institutions for the abusive treatment they gave their charges, following which he wrote

a powerful account of what it is like to live with a disturbed person prone to violating the interaction order. He pretty much ignored the role of the body in his early writings, notably in *The Presentation of Self*, then spoke eloquently about the pervasive effect that our bodily limitations and affective disturbances have on our conduct. We might take these metamorphoses as a warning against the tendency to cherry pick evidence that accords with certain preconceptions and gloss over human agency's inchoate properties. Human agency is a stochastic phenomena marked by indeterminacy and contradiction.

Still, when I hear about the "hazing" to which Goffman subjected those close to him (Lofland 2000:167; Scheff 2006:11), I cannot help thinking that such episodes are too numerous to ignore, especially when they concern a student-teacher relationship. When we profess, we impart knowledge not only via discourse but also viscerally, through our embodied actions which provide a somatic-affective backdrop against which our professed theoretical commitments loom larger or smaller. That applies not only to Erving Goffman whose deeds and theories reveal a certain thematic (dis)continuity, but to all of us who aspire to profess and who, often in spite of ourselves, serve as vital links in the long semiotic chains of history. Goffman's abiding commitment to scholarship, seriousness of his intellectual pursuits, willingness to work closely with aspiring scholars are of signal importance, but so are the occasions where he exhibited a remarkable lack of emotional intelligence as evidenced by the tears to which he reduced his charges and humiliations he caused to those close to him.

Goffman's relationships with his students deserve a special attention. In many cases, it seems, these relationships were marred by strain and ill-feelings. All teacher-apprentice bonds tend to be fragile on account of the inevitable status disparity, signal crossing, only partially fulfilled promises. Still, the number of Goffman's students regaling their ambivalence and misgivings about the master seems unusually high.

Tom Scheff, who notes that "as teacher and mentor, Goffman was generous and helpful," tells about his disappointment when he

travelled some distance to consult Goffman on his project only to be dismissed in a rather summary fashion – “he cut me off abruptly after hearing only a few minutes of my observation and confusion” (Scheff 2006:8-13). Joel Best (2007) recalls how he went to Goffman’s office to inquire about the project he tried to model on his teacher’s writing “in a sense that it had examples from fiction, newspaper articles, and so on . . . and he gave me a B+ on the paper. He told me, ‘It is really hard to do that kind of thing well.’ And that was about all the advice I ever got from him.” John Irwin (2007) recounts a similar story about a paper he turned over to Goffman who “coldly informed me that he would not work with me on a Ph.D. . . . I didn’t have much contact with Goffman for the next two years. When I put together a group of professors to serve as my orals’ committee, which had to pass on my mastery of several chosen areas of sociology before I could go on to my last task, the dissertation, I purposely left him off because I heard he gave one of the other graduate students I knew a lot of trouble during his orals.”

Particularly jarring in this respect is a story reported by Emanuel Schegloff (1992). It concerns the dissertation of Harvey Sacks on whose dissertation committee Goffman served and whose particular line of argument he questioned. This is how Schegloff reports the incident:

The upshot was that Goffman found the argument of “An initial investigation. . .” circular, and no amount of discussion could move him from this view. Nor would he, for quite a while, step aside from the committee to allow its other members to act favorably on the dissertation, as they wished to do. Eventually, however, he agreed to do so, largely at the urging of Aaron Cicourel who, in the end, signed the dissertation as Chair of its sponsoring committee, making possible the awarding of the Ph.D. in 1966 (Schegloff 1992: xxiv).

This account seems incomplete to me, as it elides the substance of the disagreement, but it is troublesome – especially given the hard time Goffman faced trying to convince his own dissertation advisors at the university of Chicago to give him a pass on his

unconventional Ph.D. thesis. If Schegloff's rendering is correct, Goffman did appear to cross the line separating quirkiness from obstinacy in this particular case. Such bad faith explains caustic remarks his students occasionally make about their mentor. Recalling "the fight with Goffman" that he and Sacks carried on and that some might have mistaken for the oedipal urge to slay one's intellectual father, Schegloff observes that the animus was coming from the other end: "It was Sacks, actually, who remarked once that we nowadays think of Oedipus story as a story about patricide, but that it was in the first instance, of course, a case of intended infanticide . . . it was his father who first left Oedipus to die, and not the other way around" (Schegloff 1988:91).

This story had a characteristic twist. When asked if Sacks was his student, Goffman once allegedly answered: "'What do you mean; I was *his* student!'" (Schegloff 1992:xxiii). This episode is indicative of Goffman's ability to shift shapes without the willingness to explain himself, to connect his past and present enselfments and square off with the ethical implications of his deeds. Goffman will not be contained; whatever frame he was about to impose on the situation and himself, he would find the way to undercut one way or another.

Several explanations have been proffered to make sense of Goffman's inconsistencies and contradictions. John Irwin invokes Goffman's view that "anyone departing from an ideal of the tall, blond haired, blue-eyed handsome or beautiful individual" was stigmatized, and as someone lacking in some such attributes, Goffman was bound to carry a stigma and occasionally act it out: "[B]eing a short Jew in worlds dominated by tall 'goyem' – he was pissed off and this shaded all of his perceptions and analysis" (Irwin 2007). Peter Manning makes a similar point: "I think the quotes from Miss Lonelyhearts are 'deep Goffman'" (Manning-Shalin 2007). Mel Kohn is more cautious in his judgment, but he believes that Goffman was self-conscious about his physical stature (Kohn 2008). Dell Hymes invokes Goffman's marginalized childhood to explain his harsher side, citing in particular these Goffman's words: "I grew up (with Yiddish) in a town where to speak another

language was to be suspect of being homosexual" (Hymes 2000:56). Paul Greelan brings up "the *Book of Job* [which] may have exerted a profound influence on Goffman," reconstructing the evolution of Erving's writing as mirroring the stages of moral growth from innocence to wisdom undergone by the biblical Job (Greelan 2000:126). Tom Scheff highlights the "cult of masculinity" that Goffman deftly analyzed in his paper "Where the Action Is," suggesting that "this idea might help to understand some of his personal life. Goffman seems to have treated his contacts with me and others as 'action.' His persona in these encounters maintaining 'composure, poise, and control of his emotions,' was not just masculine but hypermasculine" (Scheff 2006:13). I am intrigued by the parallels between Goffman's demeanor and the ironic vigil that Russian intellectuals held in response to the oppression and abusive treatment they faced in their native land, from which Erving's parents hailed (Shalin 1996, 2005). It would be interesting to find out, also, if Goffman was familiar with a story known to all educated Russians, *Ward No.6*, in which Anton Chekhov painted a gruesome picture of an asylum where patients, with or without mental health symptoms, were kept against their will in prison-like conditions.

Perhaps the boldest interpretation of Goffman's conduct comes from Dean MacCannell who reads Goffman's life as a deliberate effort to combat bad faith that Sartre decried in his existentialist philosophy:

If we list the various claims (both substantiated and the other kind) that have been made against Goffman – cynical, ironical, duplicitous, deceptive, unserious, nonresponsive – we find they are also the key terms in Sartre's analysis of 'bad faith'. It seems that Goffman took Sartre so much to heart that he assembled a persona for himself exactly on the model of 'Sartrean bad faith', perhaps in the belief that a double negative makes a positive, that is, if he could only mock up bad faith maybe he, at least, could escape the determinism he describes so well. Certainly there is evidence in his comportment that Goffman was more concerned than anyone else about the implications of his theory (MacCannell, 2000:13).

Something is definitely to be said about casting Goffman as a practicing existentialist who takes upon himself to combat bad faith

by overextending vapid behavioral and narrative idioms. There is a tinge of Nietzsche here as well, the will to turn one's life into a work of art. Clearly Goffman systematically and intentionally violated the interaction rituals that he so painstakingly described in his publications, notably in his presidential address (Goffman 1983b), and he probably did so with a strategic and pedagogic end in mind. I wonder, though, if a more mundane explanation might work here as well, the one that brings to mind the quote from Goffman taken as an epigraph for this paper:

In these matters, American Hippies, and later, "The Chicago Seven," were interesting amateurs; the great terrorists of contact forms were the mid-17th century Quakers of Britain. . . . That sturdy band of plain speakers should always stand before us as an example of the wonderfully disruptive power of systematic impoliteness, reminding us once again of the vulnerabilities of the interaction order. There is no doubt: Fox's disciples raised to the monumental heights the art of becoming the pain in the ass (Goffman 1983b:13).

Goffman's abusive habits, it seems to me, betray a person who has been abused and who passes his trauma to those around him. In this reckoning, Goffman is a person struggling to rid himself of the incivility and repression he encountered and wittingly or unwittingly absorbed during his formative years. Goffman's research agenda could have been influenced by his struggle to assert his dignity, move up in the social hierarchy, overcome the stigmatizing experience of his childhood and youth (consider in this context his remark to Dell Hymes). Hence, his preoccupation with appearances, stigmatization, and passing persisting throughout his intellectual career, as well as the impostor complex ingrained in his dramaturgical preoccupation with the con artist's craft.

None of these explanations is self-evident, neither excludes the others, yet they all point to a linkage between Goffman's life and work.

Intersection of Biography and Theory

Of particular interest in this respect is information that Mel Kohn shared with me in a personal communication on January 11, 2008, where he recounted the years he worked with Goffman at the National Institute of Mental Health. The budding scholars spend a fair amount of time together. Goffman's initial interest in psychiatry and mental institutions, according to Kohn, could have been linked to his wife's situation. Angelica Schuyler Choate, whom Goffman married in 1950, had serious mental health problems. Well before Goffman left for Berkeley, she sought psychiatric help, "she already saw a therapist when he was at St. Elizabeth's." Sky, which was Goffman's wife nickname, underwent several institutionalizations, the experience that must have left an indelible mark on Goffman who was clearly unhappy about her experience with psychiatry. Goffman's take on mental institutions at the time he started his fieldwork in St. Elizabeth's Hospital seems to reflect his personal circumstances. The situation was further exacerbated by the couple's marital problems. According to Kohn, Angelica did not immediately follow Erving to Berkeley when Herbert Blumer had offered him a job in 1958. She stayed behind with her son for about a year before joining Goffman. The impression that Kohn and his colleagues at the Institute of Mental Health formed at the time was that this separation had to do with marital difficulties. Kohn is careful to problematize his conclusions, pointing out that his information came to him second-hand: "We all assumed this [the fact that his wife did not at first join Goffman at Berkeley] had to do with the strain in their marriage. We might have learned this from people who knew both of them better. But I knew of nothing [in particular]. She did not have a job. My assumption might have been informed by those who knew the situation."

In 1964, right after Angelica was released from a mental institution, she committed suicide by jumping off the bridge. That her husband's role in the deinstitutionalization movement might have hastened Angelica's demise offers a harrowing gloss on the situation. It also presages a shift in Goffman's perspective on mental illness. Goffman's personal and painful encounter with psychiatry appears to inform his early work on mental institutions. Here is Mel Kohn again:

All I know is that he was not happy with psychiatry. . . . Erving Goffman was furious – yes, he was angry sometimes – he was furious that psychiatrists generally and mental hospital psychiatrists in particular applauded his work. He had meant to show those bastards up. He was fighting them. And everybody attributed this to his wife’s therapy and his hating psychiatrists. When he wrote “Moral Career of Mental Patient” – even though he never said so himself – all of us thought, “Aha, if I had not got those bastards with mental hospital as a total institution, then I’m really gonna give it to them now. Isn’t it wonderful?” (Kohn 2007).

It is impossible to prove the link between Goffman’s personal circumstances and his professional interest in total institutions without access to Goffman’s archives, but the available materials provide ample food for this conjecture. Think about the disdain Goffman showed toward psychiatry in the 1950’s. It is palpable in *Asylum* where he asserted without reservation that “the ‘mentally ill’ . . . and mental patients distinctly suffer not from mental illness, but from contingencies,” that “the craziness or ‘sick behavior’ claimed for the mental patient is by and large a product of the claimant’s social distance from the situation that the patient is in, and is not primarily a product of mental illness” (Goffman 1961:135, 130). Following the tragic death of his wife, Goffman was less likely to put “mental illness” in quotation marks. Grudgingly, he comes around to admit the somatic roots of mental illness, even though he declined to amend his earlier position explicitly: “Whatever the cause of the offender’s psychological state – and clearly this may sometimes be organic – the social significance of the disease is that its carrier somehow hits upon the way that things can be made hot for us” (Goffman 1971:389). There are indications that Goffman was aware about the need to fine-tune his perspective. According to David Mechanic, “Later in Goffman’s life, after he had to live through an episode of mental illness involving another person close to him, he is said to have remarked that had he been writing *Asylums* at that point, it would have been a very different book” (Mechanic 1989:150).

The intersection between Goffman’s theory and biography illuminates a potential weakness in his dramaturgical analysis. I am

talking about his early tendency to disembody human agency, to equate face with mask, his believe that "this mask is our truer self" (Goffman, 1961:19). On several occasions Goffman tells his readers that everyday life differs from theater, that there is no hiatus between the audience and performers in the real world where we find ourselves embedded as actors, stage managers, and onlookers at the same time. Seminal as this observation is, it does not go far enough in separating the make-belief-world of theater from the flesh-and-blood world of everyday life where real blood flows, humiliations endured, fortunes made, kingdoms rise and fall. Expressive and instrumental qualities that Erving strategically separated in his theory are intertwined in our mortal lives. A failed task or a job well done may be supremely expressive, just as it could be singularly helpful in sorting out participants' competing self-claims. In everyday life we constantly check other people's (and our own) self-claims against whatever we are prepared to sign in the flesh – behaviorally and affectively. The notion that "[t]he world, in truth, is a wedding" (Goffman 1959:36) has a nice ring to it, but as every metaphor, it can be overextended. A theory according to which "the person's face clearly is something that is not lodged in or on the body but rather something that is diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter" (Goffman, 1967:7) clues us to the social dimension of our existence, but it also tends to gloss over the fact that our faces are embedded not only in social settings but also in our somatic frames, that the face is a window through which we gaze at our corporeal being. Goffman's contention that our "body merely provide[s] a peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time" (Goffman 1959:253) runs the risk of disembodiment of our existence and downgrading the resources available to us in everyday life where we can tolerably settle questions of authenticity.

The impression management technique focuses on the qualities amenable to semiotic control, susceptible to simulation and dissimulation. Semiotic resources of the body are vast indeed, but they are not limitless. Not all body indicia can be stage-managed. You cannot sit at the piano for an improvisation, take a bar exam on the fly, stand your ground in a dog fight, or argue gracefully in a high-stake debate – unless you have the right stuff,

the hard-acquired habitus. The ceremonial skills we deploy at a wedding will not get us far in the operating room or on a dance floor. Talking the talk is one thing, walking the walk is another, and rocking the rock is something else altogether. You can fake an orgasm, but it is hard to simulate a hard-on, or dissimulate it, for that matter. Much of our life is embodied, substantive, and instrumental in a way that anonymous encounters in the elevator or chance meetings on the streets are not. The fact that Goffman chose to separate the substantive content of social conduct from its expressive properties limits the reach of the interaction order theory (See Blumer 2000).

The dramaturgical analysis zeroes in on “the expressive costume that individuals are expected to wear whenever they are in the immediate presence of others” (Goffman 1967:133). Productive as such a focus proved to be, it obscures important dimension of social interaction, the embodiment-disembodiment-reembodiment arc distinguishing social practice. Goffman astutely points out how a waiter displays a snappy front in the hopes of earning better tips, a plumber surreptitiously takes off his glasses to protect his manly image, and a prostitute spends extra time validating a customer’s self-image. But he does not square off with the fact that the poor food quality and untimely delivery will ultimately trump the expressive finesse, that the plumber will earn respect by stopping the leak, and that ego-stroking is not the only skill bearing on a sex worker’s performance.

Goffman’s Affective Spread

One more biocritically significant facet of Goffman’s research agenda deserves to be mentioned here, however briefly. It concerns the affective halo surrounding his theory. The range of emotions found in Goffman’s writings is quite narrow (Scheff 2006). You will not find there any treatment of love, joy, or contentment. The master emotion in Goffman’s corpus is “embarrassment” and its permutations. When Goffman compares family dynamics to Cold War or imbues street interactions with harmful implications, he may project unto the world his own affective proclivities, generalize the experience that is less than

universal.

"I hope it is not inappropriate to speak about Goffman's anger," writes Dell Hymes (2000:56). "At least it is partly in terms of anger that I made sense of him myself [of his] rudeness, his-game-playing, his invention of inviolable rules of which one had not hitherto heard" (Hymes 2000:56). "A number of people who knew him in person referred to him as sour and sardonic, although a minority objected to those labels," observed Robert Erwin (2000:94). "The word I would use to characterize his personality is eerie. . . . Dread is not too strong a word for what I felt in him. He seemed to fear that to be splattered with joy would be lethal." Indeed, it is hard to avoid the impression that Goffman's live performances bear witness to certain somatic-affective undercurrents of his personal existence. We can sense that when he storms out of the classroom after an African-American student queried him about the political implications of his thought (Marx 2000:67), loses his temper with Marvin Scott during a scholarly exchange (Becker 2007), or tells his dinner companions what slobbs they are (Lofland 2000:167).

Clearly, there were lighter moments coexisting with the darker ones: "Even though Erving could be a pain in the ass and sometimes cruel, my wife and I loved him because he was so smart, fascinating, entertaining, and occasionally kind. He brightened up our lives" (Irwin 2007). It is a question of balance. Gauging the affective halo surrounding Erving through different stages of his life cycle and the manner in which it might have been reflected in his work is a potentially fruitful avenue for research. My preliminary study of affective markers in Goffman's corpus shows that the emotionally loaded indicators in his early works come chiefly from the anger and fear families of emotions (the methodological foundations of this study are discussed in Shalin 2006).

The Hermeneutical Horizons of Goffman's Imagination

While Goffman is aware of this methodological agenda, he does not fully square off with the fact that social researchers in general and participant observers in particular draw on the expertise they

acquire as members of society. Consider the following observation that appears in *Forms of Talk*:

The sexual *moan*. This subvocal tracking of the course of sexually climactic experience is a display available for both sexes, but said to be increasingly fashionable for females – amongst whom, of course, the sound tracing can be strategically employed to delineate an ideal development in the marked absence of anything like the real thing (Goffman 1983c:106).

Goffman's works are replete with the observations that presuppose Goffman's exposure to the relevant experience or vouch for his willingness to trust his contemporaries to supply the meaning of the reported activity. However, the exact source of Goffman's knowledge about the "real thing" and the "faked one" and the empirical indicators thereof are rarely spelled out.

. . .

The Theoretical Implications of Goffman's Embodied Practice

The purpose of this brief exploratory paper was to show that Goffman's theoretical corpus can be profitably studied in light of his biographical corpus. As one can gather from this discussion, I am trying to convince myself as much as I am straining to explain this project to my colleagues and would-be participants in the Erving Goffman Project. I end my discussion with reflections on the lessons that biocritical analysis can teach us about Goffman's life and work, the lessons that are tentative in the extreme and that should be treated as hypotheses rather than definitive conclusions.

1. The interaction order is hard to pin down: boil it down to a few fast rules, and you will see that those are honored in the breach as often as they are not. The exception only confirms the rule, goes the old saw of which Goffman makes a frequent use, but how pervasively must the rule be violated before it becomes an exception and how often the exception is to occur before it becomes a rule? Displaying requisite selves, protecting other people's faces, maintaining proper affect, remedying situational infractions – there is hardly an interaction ritual that Goffman would not violate when

the opportunity presented itself. This is not to say that the interaction order is a figment of our imagination, only that it is indefinitely flexible and that its power to constrain is perennially problematic. It is less of a ceremony than a semi-chaotic order that keeps emerging in fits and starts without ever solidifying into a reality *sui generis*.

2. Goffman's theory of interaction order glosses over the issues of power which inform much of our interactive strategies. If Goffman was able to get away with repeated violations of conventional etiquette, it is in large measure because he wielded vast power in the academic world that compelled those he offended to swallow their pride and back off in the face of his in-your-face performances. Even Dell Hymes, an eminent scholar in his own right, preferred to ignore Goffman's "invention of inviolable rules of which one had not hitherto heard" (Hymes 2000:56) rather than challenge Erving on making frivolous calls. Those in power and authority can get away with violating the rules the rest of us may decline to challenge openly. The fact that Goffman's students frequently bore the brunt of his off-putting demeanor is indicative in this respect.

3. To an appreciable if hard to gauge extent, sociological inquiry is grounded in biographical circumstances. As Nietzsche (1966:13) once observed, "every great philosophy so far has been . . . the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir." That Goffman is a great sociologist seems clear enough, and as the above discussion suggests, Goffman's somatic-affective experience fed his sociological imagination. While most of us are content to straddle a discourse and remain within the folds of the reigning orthodoxy, the great minds like Goffman's are able to get out of the discourse machine and ride an emotion towards a new paradigmization. As any historical agent, Goffman is constrained by the grand frameworks making round in his time – "sociological reality *sui generis*," "structural imperatives," or "syntactic rules of grammar," but he puts them to a decidedly novel use. The insights Goffman has to offer are personal; they are sifted through the affective filter that informs his ethnographic sensibilities and colors his conceptual innovations. While such insights may be

biased and thus need to be corrected, they often have a visceral truth to them that owes much to Goffman's willingness to insert himself into the hermeneutical circle and allow his affective compass to guide his inquiry.

4. Goffman's theories elide certain emotions in part because he had troubles experiencing particular affective states. If his formulations sometimes evince the uneasiness about the bodily dimension of social interaction, it is in part because he felt ambivalent about his own corporeal dimensions and embodied qualities. As several commentators point out, Goffman's take on stigmatized agency implicated his own embodied being. A master of ceremony, Goffman felt more comfortable communicating the niceties of social etiquette and expressive behavior than articulating the substantive, exchange-based transactions in which social life is grounded and which serve as a check on our expressive claims.

5. The dramaturgical analysis tends to gloss over the embodied dimensions of social interaction, to downplay the instrumental and the substantive in relation to the expressive and the communicative. The Durkheimian insistence on social reality as a phenomenon *sui generis* is partially to blame for this weakness. This emphasis played a crucial role in circumscribing sociology as a separate disipline, but policing its borderlines and fending off the encroachment from neighboring disciplines like biology, physiology, psychology, and psychiatry had an unintended consequence of delimiting the scope of sociological investigation and discouraging interdisciplinary research. No doubt society informs the somatic-affective phenomena, but its reach is powerfully checked by the corporeal and neurological resources of the body that cannot be dramatized away and that shape social dynamics according to the logic of their own. When psychic events come to our attention, we should not assume that they are necessarily psycho-logical. By the same token, social phenomena are not automatically and exclusively socio-logical. The bio-social continuum calls for an analysis that undermines the bureaucratic imperative of adhering to the disciplinary logic *sui generis*.

6. The range of behavioral and emotional enselfments we glean

from Goffman life invites us to conceptualize human agency and personhood in a pragmatist key that escape the confines of the traditional psychological formulations. Psychologists start with the premise that our feelings, actions, and thoughts reflect relatively stable, predictable personality patterns persisting over time and manifesting themselves across situations. Psychological testing tends to privilege tools that reveal enduring traits and discriminate against personal qualities which attest to the volatility of our actions and sentiments. From the vantage point of pragmatist hermeneutics, such indeterminacy is a normal reflection of conflicting social pressures. Human beings are conceived here as nonclassically propertied objects akin to particles in micro physics. When we don't look at a particle, it is everywhere at once, it is a bundle of probabilities that requires a measurement event to materialize as a particle with a definite mass, position, momentum, and other properties. In a similar fashion, our affect continuously and subconsciously scans the world for saliency; it generates conflicting feelings, it is pulled in different directions at once, and it takes a specific occasion – a personal encounter, a request to fill a survey, a need to take a public stance – for a human agent to adopt a specific emotional attitude called for in a given culture. Predictable though such an attitude might be, it is only a matter of probability that a person will show this or that affective stance in any given situation.

7. Biocritical inquiry raises ethical issues concerning privacy, hearsay, gossip mongering, and general propriety of exploring historical personae who have explicitly or tacitly eschewed publicity. It also puts into a spotlight the biocritic's biases, agendas, and framing preferences. Those looking into other people's backstage regions must be ready to grant access to theirs. The question is how we can conduct biocritical and autobiocritical investigations with both tact and verve, expose hearsay for what it is while making the most of it. Plutarch built his work around gossip but after he strained all the hearsay through the sieve of his wisdom and experience, it congealed into *Lives*, one of the key sources in the Western cannon. Comparing the ancient and modern ways of biocritical construction is something we should do,

with the pragmatist perspective on meaning as an embodied phenomenon serving us as a guide.

References

Becker, H. 2007. Becker on Marwin Scott, personal communication, 08-25-07, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/becker.html>

Berger, B. 2000/1973. "A Fan Letter on Erving Goffman." Pp. 278-289 in *Erving Goffman*, Vol. 1. Ed by G. A. Fine, P. Manning and G. W. H. Smith. Sage Publications: London.

Best, J. 2007. Interview with D. Shalin, http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/best_07.html.

Blumer, H. 2000/1972. "Action vs. Interaction: *Relations in Public – Microstudies of the Public Order* by Erving Goffman. Pp. 3-7 in *Erving Goffman*, Vol. 1. Ed by G. A. Fine, P. Manning and G. W. H. Smith. Sage Publications: London.

Bourdieu, P. 2000/1983. "Erving Goffman: Discoverer of the Infinitely Small." Pp. 3-4 in *Erving Goffman*, Vol. 1. Ed by G. A. Fine, P. Manning and G. W. H. Smith. Sage Publications: London.

Erwin, R. 2000/1992. "The Nature of Goffman." Pp. 84-96 in *Erving Goffman*, Vol. 1. Ed by G. A. Fine, P. Manning and G. W. H. Smith. Sage Publications: London.

Cooley, Ch. [1909] 1962. *Social Organization*. New York: Schocken Books.

Dickens, D. 2008. Dickens on Goffman, personal communication, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/dickens.html>

Fine, G. A. 1999. "Claiming the Text: Parsing the Sardonic Visions of Erving Goffman and Thorstein Veblen. Pp. 177-197 in Goffman and Social Organization. London: Routledge.

Fine G., P. Manning, and G. Smith. 2000. "Introduction." Pp. ix-xliv in *Erving Goffman*, Vol. 1. Ed by G. A. Fine, P. Manning and G. W. H. Smith. Sage Publications: London.

Goffman, E. 1952. "On Cooling the Mark Out." *Psychiatry: Journal of Interpersonal Relations* 15:451-463.

Goffman, E. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Goffman, E. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Goffman, E. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

Goffman, E. 1967. *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Goffman, E. 1971. *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York: Basic Books.

Goffman, E. 1972. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961.

Goffman, E. 1972. *Gender Advertisements*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979

Goffman, E. 1977. "The Arrangement Between the Sexes," *Theory and Society* 4:301-331

Goffman, E. 1983a. "[Felicity's Condition](#)." *American Journal of Sociology* 89:1-53.

Goffman, E. 1983b. "[The Interaction Order](#)." *American Sociological*

Review 48:1-17.

Goffman, E. 1983c. *Forms of Talk*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gouldner, A. 2000/1970. "Other Symptoms of the Crisis: Goffman's Dramaturgy and Other New Theories." (*The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. New York: Basic Books). Pp. 245-255 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Gonos, G. 1980. "The Class Position of Goffman's Sociology: Social Origins of an American Structuralism." Pp. 134-169 in J. Ditton, ed., *The View from Goffman*. London: The Macmillan Press.

Goodley, D. et al. 2004. *Researching Life Stories. Method, Theory and Analysis in a Biographical Age*. New York: Routledge.

Greelan, P. 2000/1984 "Vicissitudes of the Sacred." Pp. 122-155 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Grimshaw, A. D. 2000/1983. "Erving Goffman: A Personal Appreciation." *Language and Society*. 12:147-148.

Heidegger, Martin. 1962. *Being and Time*. Harper & Row Publishers.

Hymes, D. 1984. " [On Erving Goffman](#)." Pp. 48-59 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Intercyberlibrary, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/index.html>.

International Biography Initiative, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/programs/bios.html>.

Irwin, J. 2007. *Fragments from the*

Autobiography, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/irwin.html>.

Jaworski, C. D. "Erving Goffman: The Reluctant Apprentice." *Symbolic Interaction* 23:299-308.

Kohn, M. 2008. Personal Communication, January 11, 2008.

Lofland, J. 2000/ Erving Goffman's Sociological Legacies." Pp. 156-178 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

MacCannell, D. 2000/1983. "Erving Goffman (1922-1982)." Pp. 8-37 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

MacCannell, M. 2007. Personal Correspondence, September 10, 2007.

Manning, P. 2000/1976. "The Decline of Civility: A Comment on Erving Goffman's Sociology." pp. 329-347 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W.

H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Manning-Shalin Exchange on Goffman.
2007, http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/comments/manning_shalin.html

Montaigne, Michel. 1987. *The Complete Essays*. London: Penguin Books.

Marx, G. 2000/1984. "[Role Models and Role Distance. A Remembrance of Erving Goffman](#)." Pp. 60-70 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W.H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Mechanic, D. 1988. "Medical Sociology: Some Tensions Among Theory, Method, and Substance." *Journal of Health and Social*

Behavior 30:147-160.

Posner, J. 2000. "Erving Goffman: His Presentation of Self." Pp. 990-113 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Petrovskaya, I. F. 2003. *Biographika*. Santk-Peterburg: Logos.

Roberts, B. *Biographical Research*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Scheff, T. 2006. *Goffman Unbound*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Schegloff, E. 1988. "Goffman and the Analysis of Conversation." Pp. 89-135 in P. Drew and A. Wooton, ed, *Erving Goffman. Exploring the Interaction Order*. Boston: Northwestern University Press.

Schegloff, E. 1992. "Introduction." Pp. ix-lxv in Gail Jefferson ed., *Lectures on Conversation. Volume 1. Harvey Sacks*. Blackwell: Padstow, Cornwall.

Shalin, D. Shalin, D. 1986. "[Pragmatism and Social Interactionism](#)." *American Sociological Review* 51:9-30.

Shalin, D. 1992. "[Critical Theory and the Pragmatist Challenge](#)." *American Journal of Sociology* 96:237-279.

Shalin, D. 1996. "[Intellectual Culture](#)." Pp. 41-98 in Dmitri Shalin, ed. *Russian Culture at the Crossroads: Paradoxes of Postcommunist Culture*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Shalin, D. 2004. "[Liberalism, Affect Control, and Emotionally Intelligent Democracy](#)." *Journal of Human Rights* 3:407-428.

Shalin, D. 2006. "Dmitri Shalin on the International Biography Initiative Project," http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/Supplements/shalin_comments1.html.

Shalin, D. 2006a. "Agency Scan and E-motion Template Matrix Analysis: Theory, Methodology, Preliminary Results." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Montreal, August 12, http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/programs/etm_findings.html

Shalin, D. 2007. "[Signing in the Flesh: Notes on Pragmatist Hermeneutics](#)." *Sociological Theory* 25:193-224.

Shalin, D. 2008, "National Sociology and Paradigm Pluralism: Pragmatist Reflections on Current Russian Sociology," *Slavic Review* (under review), http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/articles/shalin_nationalsoc.html.

Shanahan, M. and R. Macmillan (2008). *Biography and Sociological Imagination. Contexts and Contingencies*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Shlapentokh, V. 2008. Interview with D. Shalin, http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/goffman/shlapentokh_07.html.

Strong, P. M. 2000/1983. "[The Importance of Being Erving: Erving Goffman, 1922-1982](#)." *Sociology of Health and Illness* 5:345-355.

Winkin, Y. 1988. [Le Moments et Leurs Homes](#). Paris: Minuit.

Winkin, Y. 1999. "[Erving Goffman: What is a Life? The Uneasy Making of Intellectual Biography](#)." Pp. 19-41 in G. Smith, ed., *Goffman and Social Organization Studies in Sociological Legacy*. London: Routledge.

Winkin, Y. 2000/1992. "[Baltasound as the Symbolic Capital of Social Interaction](#)." Pp. 193-212 in G. A. Fine, P. Manning, and G. W. H. Smith, eds., *Erving Goffman*. London: Sage.

Zissner, W. (2004). *Writing About Your Life*. New York: Marlowe & Company.