

Can We Scale Up Goffman? From Vegas to the World Stage

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Introduction

It is an all-too-common lament among sociologists that Erving Goffman, though his writings remain widely read and respected today, failed to spawn an ongoing and cohesive research tradition. His idiosyncratic methods of data collection, the uniqueness of his biographical trajectory, and even his prickly personality have all been invoked to explain the lack of a distinctly Goffmanian school of research (Gamson 1985; Scheff, Phillips, and Kincaid 2006; Smith 2006; Shalin 2014). It is also the case that micro-oriented sociologies, such as symbolic interactionism and especially ethnomethodology, have been pushed to the margins of sociology as a consequence of the ascendancy of quantitative methods. This paper is, on one level, an argument for continuing to read Goffman as a seminal figure in the sociology of everyday life. But it is more than this. It is an argument that we should be *ambitious* about using Goffman to generate and develop theories about other levels of social reality, including the most macro of them all: the global level. I make this argument through recounting my own experience attempting to replicate Goffman's famed ethnographic research as a casino dealer in Las Vegas.

Are there contemporary sociological traditions about macro-level phenomena that *do* explicitly draw inspiration from Goffman's writings? Yes, and in this paper I will compare and contrast two of the most prominent of such theories, both of which address the phenomenon of globalization. On one hand, there is the *world society* variant of neo-institutionalist theory, associated with John Meyer and his colleagues and students at Stanford. On the other, a school of critical sociology known as *global ethnography*, as developed by Michael Burawoy and his students at Berkeley (Burawoy et al. 2000; Michael Burawoy 2009; Salzinger 2003; Sherman 2007; Sharone 2013). The assumptions, methods, and implications of these two traditions, the Meyerian and the Burawoyian, are generally understood to be polar opposites. Yet one thing that unites them, I argue, is that they both attempt to integrate some basic Goffmanian insights into their theories of the social world at *levels of analysis beyond the micro*.

I came to think about the commonalities and contrasts between these two theoretical traditions during a study of the international casino industry and through my own engagement with Goffman's work. I ultimately became convinced that the world society thesis is premised upon a mis-reading of Goffman as a discursive theorist of *cultural order*, an interpretation which leads the researcher to assume an oversocialized conception of actors as mere enactors of scripts. Global ethnography, in contrast, takes seriously Goffman's dramaturgical model of social life as a system of *strategic interactions*.

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An important consequence of these disparate uses of Goffman is divergent understandings of the relation between the front and back stage of social life. The world society thesis obliterates any such distinction; while for global ethnography, it is the central dynamic driving national processes in the new world order.

I first discovered the relevance of Goffman's theory to my own research rather serendipitously, while doing ethnographic fieldwork as a casino dealer in order to study interactions among dealers, gamblers and pit bosses in a Nevada casino. One afternoon before work I stumbled upon Goffman's classic study of risk-taking, "Where the Action Is," an essay which evinces an insider's knowledge of the workings of a casino pit (1967). Upon digging further into biographies of Goffman's life, I learned that Goffman had spent several summers, and even perhaps a full year, working as a casino dealer in Las Vegas during the 1950s. Anyone who knows anything about Goffman knows that he at one point worked as a gym assistant in a mental hospital—which became the empirical material for his book *Asylums* (Goffman 1961)—and many others know that he had done his dissertation research in a village in the Shetland Isles—the insights of which led to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959). Much less well known were his research trips to Reno and Las Vegas while he was a faculty member at the University of California at Berkeley.

As I read his anecdotes and examples about casino dealing in the 1950s, however, I was struck by how similar his experiences were to my own, by how little had changed in Nevada in the past 50 years. Goffman, along with others who worked in and studied Las Vegas casinos during this era, described dealers as skillfully plying their trade and taking part in the action on the tables (Moehring 2000; Schwartz 2013). As I document in my empirical research, dealing in Nevada today remains organized as a craft (Sallaz 2002). Casino workers exercise autonomy via their craft, they actively contribute to the sense of "action" on the tables, while pit bosses trust dealers to guard the tables and act as *de facto* managers of the play. It was as though the Vegas casino had been hermetically sealed from the outside world.

Following my Nevada research, I had an opportunity to do an ethnography of a casino in a very different context: in post-apartheid South Africa. It turned out that following the end of apartheid, the new government, the African National Congress, had legalized gambling and licensed Las Vegas style casinos throughout the country. At first glance, this development seems entirely consistent with convergence theories of globalization, which predict that American-style institutions are diffusing throughout the world. As my ethnographic research in South Africa progressed, however, I discovered significant differences between how casino work was organized in Nevada versus South Africa. Though I had begun my research grounded in Goffmanian concepts about micro interactions on blackjack tables in Las Vegas, I was now forced to think about macro-level processes such as the globalization of organizational forms.

The World Society Thesis

In particular, John Meyer's world-society thesis offered a powerful explanation of the spread of Vegas style casino gambling (Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992). As explicated in an influential 1997 AJS article, this theory argues that it is not the greater efficiency of American forms which drive their diffusion, but the normative power of institutional scripts generated in the United States (Meyer et al. 1997). To document this process, world society scholars have assembled an impressive array of evidence concerning the global standardization of education curricula, national constitutions and other formal documents (Powell and DiMaggio 1991).

Theoretically, world society scholars ground their argument in Goffman, generating what they call a macro-phenomenological approach to action and identity. It is macro in that it views identities as emerging relationally. It is phenomenological in that it opposes realist accounts which focus upon the interplay of power and interests. As Meyer et al state,

The many individuals both inside and outside the state who engage in state formation and policy formulation are enactors of scripts rather more than they are self-directed actors. The social psychology at work is that of Goffman... emphasizing dramaturgical and symbolic processes in place of the hard-boiled calculation of interests assumed by rationalist actor-centric approaches (Meyer et al. 1997: 150-1)

Goffman thus provides the world society story three essential components of a comprehensive theory. First, a **formal mechanism**. National elites are embedded in a global culture which negatively constrains but also positively guides their decisions. Second, a predictor of the **substantive content** of new global scripts. For just as Goffman argued that the social glue holding together modern society is a ritualistic respect for the individual, the world society thesis argues that the common content of emergent models is a respect for individual rights and freedoms. Third, Goffman offers a way to account for **empirical anomalies**. Should local practices not match the global script, the fault lies not with the actors, but with unintended consequences such as logistical problems involved in translating models into action, a phenomenon known as a decoupling.

Assessing Fit

At first glance, the world society story fit the South African case quite well. While gambling had been prohibited during apartheid, policy-makers in newly democratic South Africa decided to make gambling an individual freedom not to be proscribed by the state. And rather than sanctioning some form of indigenous gambling, the party in charge of the new government—the African National Congress—explicitly modeled South Africa’s new gambling industry on that of Nevada’s. Large, extravagantly themed casino-hotel-resorts were built in and around the cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and others (Sallaz 2012). Most were owned and operated by traded entertainment firms, some South African and some foreign.

I ended up in one such casino which, by happenstance, was constructed to be a carbon copy of the casino at which I’d done fieldwork as a dealer in Las Vegas. I put my “black and whites” (formal attire) back on and again took my place behind the tables. It did not take long at all, however to see that the interaction order on the casino floor in South Africa couldn’t have been more different than in Las Vegas. While Las Vegas casinos are characterized by a high degree of trust between managers and dealers, South African casinos are replete with managerial suspicion of workers. As a result, casino work there is deskilled and intensely monitored by management; while relations among dealers and gamblers are greatly strained, to say the least (Sallaz 2008). In sum, on the ground, well below the level of policy and formal models, I discovered not convergence but divergence in the global gambling industry. Underneath surface similarities, the interaction order inside casinos was very different.

How to Explain?

As I moved from describing these different gambling cultures, to explaining how they came into being, I drew upon Goffman's insights, especially those elaborated in the monographs *Stigma* and *Strategic Interaction*. I argued that in both the US and South Africa, during key moments when gambling legislation was being debated, the symbolic meaning of casinos was unsettled and contested. Those opposed to casinos attempted to discredit them as impure, stigmatized enterprises. These were not innocuous businesses selling a chance to play harmless games, they argued, but dens of vice, magnets for organized crime, exploiters of the poor, and predators of gambling addicts (Clotfelter and Cook 1991; Schwartz 2006; Schüll 2012).

Casino proponents, rather than denying such stigmas, deployed various disidentifiers to deflect attention away from them. Gambling may not be the ideal business, they argued, but it creates jobs and stimulates the economy (Goodman 1996; D'Hautesserre 2008). And most importantly, in both South Africa and the US, proponents deflected moral stigmas by linking casinos to a larger plan of *affirmative action for minority workers* who suffered discrimination in mainstream sectors of the economy. Affirmative action quotas were set up for the casinos, and state agencies created to monitor the firms. The ultimate success of the affirmative action plans, however, differed greatly in the two countries. In South Africa, they were stringently enforced, but with perverse consequences, as casino operators distrusted the minority workers they were required to hire. This distrust translated into a contentious casino culture. In the United States, affirmative action goals were never enforced with much rigor, and so managers relied on personal networks to staff the casino floor with trusted confederates. The end result is a cooperative casino culture in Las Vegas, one which has persisted from the time of Erving Goffman's fieldwork up to today.

Towards a Goffmanian Theory of Globalization

What are the implications of these findings for how we understand globalization, and especially the ongoing relevance of Goffman's theoretical insights? I offer three axioms that I view as fundamental to a Goffmanian perspective on globalization. In doing so my aim is to reclaim Goffman's legacy from the new institutionalist tradition, to argue that Goffman allows us to theorize not just consensus and diffusion, but also conflict and differentiation. Taking seriously the distinction between frontstage versus backstage actions, and applying this distinction to the actions of organizations and institutions rather than simply individuals, is essential to this task.

First Point: The Situation is Where the Action is

The first axiom I call: the situation is where the action is. As a methodological principle, it states that we must study more than just the formal structure of institutions (Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Bechky 2011). The "doing" of everyday life, and in particular routine interactions among organizational participants, deserves close attention. In the context of a casino, we would document empirically how gamblers interact with front-line staff such as dealers, how dealers interact with managers such as pit bosses, and how gamblers interact with one another. Goffman's own writings continue to provide a catalogue of concepts to understand such interactions as performances, ripe as they are with meanings and purposes (Edgley 2013).

In the world society story, the front-stage is the mental horizon of elites as they internalize global scripts. What happens subsequently on the ground is relegated to the background of analysis. Ever the ethnographer, Goffman argued the converse, that the front-stage of social life is the situation, where individuals experience and negotiate objective structures within institutions (1989). Rather than starting with the convergence of organizational forms and explaining as “decoupling” any divergence within them, a Goffmanian take on globalization takes the latter as a starting point for problematizing assumptions about the former.

Second Point: Scripts May be Globalized, but Actors and Audiences Still Matter

The second axiom may be stated as: scripts may be globalized, but actors and audiences still matter. The world society thesis offers an oversocialized vision of actors. Global scripts, it argues, provide concrete roles and goals which constitute national actors who then “make valiant efforts to live up to the model.” Should actors fail to live up to the model despite their good intentions, decoupling once again comes to the rescue as an explanation why. In my research, however, I found it necessary to question this assumption that institutional actors are always sincere in their attempts to perform global scripts. Following the general propositions of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, I argued that performers can be not only taken in by, but can also be cynical about their parts.

For example, while casino operators in both Las Vegas and South Africa publicly acknowledged the legitimacy of employment equity for minorities, my ethnographic research revealed that, behind closed doors, these same individuals viewed their role as “responsible employers” with much cynicism. In the US, however, state regulators lacked the power and resources to make firms play this role; they were, in Goffman’s terms, a “weak audience” unable to influence the performance. In South Africa, in contrast, strategic interactions between performing firms and regulatory audiences played out very differently. There, managers, though also cynical about their role as modern employers, faced a “strong” audience, that is, a gambling board which assiduously monitored their labor practices (Sallaz 2009). The point is that a cross-national comparison allows us to recast decoupling, not as a gulf which opens spontaneously between the front and back stage of social life, but as an outcome of the successful management of institutional front and back stages. Nor were audiences simply “rationalized others” in the minds of elites, but specific regulatory agencies which varied in their capacity to monitor and discipline firms.

Third Point: Global Models are Resources as well as Rules

Our third axiom can be stated thus: global models are resources as well as rules. Rather than viewing the overarching “scripts” of individualism now disseminated globally as constraints upon action, we treat them as the terrain upon which struggles are now carried out. As Randall Collins, Philip Manning, and others have argued, Goffman’s theory is congruent with a conflict perspective on social life (Collins 2014; Manning 2001). Consequently, while we may find consensus concerning broad values and goals, there will be struggle over how adherence to these goals is defined and displayed. Over, that is, the expressive equipment of institutional interactions.

Consider an example from South Africa. Following the end of apartheid, public and private actors negotiated to decide upon a new system of categorizing citizens. Should the old system of classifying racial groups as white, black or coloured be retained? Should white women be counted as protected minorities, since they were discriminated against in some areas but not others during apartheid? And what about the expressive equipment through which employers would display adherence to new equity laws? Negotiations eventually settled upon single-page quota charts which detail the percentage of non-whites in various occupational categories. Now, ten years later, these charts are being revised on the grounds that they in fact obscure the tokenization of non-whites, who experience a profound gulf between their dramatic and real power within organizations.

The point here is that models are not imported unreflexively from the outside. Because they will subsequently constitute the terrain upon which strategic interactions take place, these models will be treated as valuable resources by potential actors and audiences.

Conclusion

To summarize, I've argued that far from being an idiosyncratic analysis of interpersonal interaction, Goffman's theory offers a powerful tool for analyzing the contemporary process of globalization. Goffman can be scaled up, so to speak. To illustrate, I've contrasted my own, micro-oriented approach to comparative ethnography with the institutional approach of the world society school. Both approaches take seriously Goffman's admonition to view reality as a relational construct, and to examine the meanings which emerge and circulate through these relations. I however have argued that we mustn't succumb to an oversocialized vision of global actors, lest we lose sight of the strategic character of institutional interactions as they emerge on a global stage.

I applied these insights to the case of the spread of Vegas-style casino gambling, which has been a remarkable development over the past two to three decades. It's impossible to account for this development using only standard ideas of consumer preferences (demand for gambling opportunities presumably did not suddenly change). A much better explanation is one that considers strategic interactions among governments, firms and various publics. Legalizing and regulating a long-stigmatized commodity such as casino gambling is a dramaturgical accomplishment. Furthermore, it is one which subsequently structures everyday life inside of the casinos themselves.

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