

# The Evolution of the Concept of Social Action: Parsons and Goffman

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## Abstract

Goffman's analysis of gambling is very important for our overall understanding of his work. This is because Goffman's sociology is driven by both theoretical and ethnographic impulses, and his gambling project is the third of his three major ethnographic investigations. Goffman's study of gambling is a key component in his sociology because it (a) develops a conceptual approach to the study of the interaction order, (b) extends Parsons' and Merton's analysis of social action and social control, and (c) links the microeconomic analysis of the social world that he associated with Thomas Schelling that has become the mainstay of the analytic sociology.

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### Goffman as Reader

Erving Goffman is widely thought of as an ethnographic symbolic interactionist. In addition, he is institutionally recognized as a sociological theorist whose work is required reading in every undergraduate and graduate sociological theory course. However, only occasionally is he recognized as a great reader. Given that just about everyone accepts the first two of these descriptions, it's worth beginning by emphasizing the importance of the third.

Goffman learned his sociology in the context of the post World War II expansion of the American university. The GI Bill had opened the doors of universities to large numbers of returning soldiers and Goffman's experiences at the University of Chicago have to be understood in this context (Fine, 1995). The unfriendly professor-student ratios of those years meant that anyone who was going to succeed in that environment was likely to be not just self-motivated but also self-taught. Blessed with a supportive and an unusually talented cohort, Goffman refined the critical, wide cast reading habits that he had first developed as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto (Smith 2006:15). By the time he completed his dissertation in 1953, he was steeped in the writings of the Chicago School, the sociology of Max Weber and the German methodological debates that framed his work and that of Simmel and others, the development of Emile Durkheim's sociology, leading to the breakthroughs in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Freud's work and the development of psychoanalysis generally, the existentialism of Sartre and Camus and of course the full complement of writings concerning Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action and the reactions to it by Merton and others. In addition, Goffman had a tremendous knowledge of studies of animal behavior and a dazzling array of other subject areas. In his spare time he also found time to read a staggering number of novels, newspapers, magazines and the literary detritus of everyday life. C. Wright Mills concludes *The Sociological Imagination* with the instruction to sociologists to keep notebooks of all their disparate readings and observations. Goffman's must have been amazing. And this last observation is not really a guess: the footnotes to all his writings have allowed us to glimpse the inner world of his study.

Later Goffman was exposed to the microeconomic ideas of Thomas Schelling and others. Since we read Goffman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is easy to forget that the context of Schelling's ideas was not consumerist trends but the Cold War and the threat of global nuclear destruction. Understood in this way, Goffman's other writings about espionage dovetail easily into his interest in Schelling's work. His reworking of Schelling's early writings about Cold War politics into an analysis of the world of the casino and the issue of risk-taking in general, required a creative development that is likely to seem less radical now than it was in its day.

At some point Goffman also came to appreciate the importance of ordinary language philosophy for sociology. This is likely linked to his time at Berkeley where he got to know John Searle. This fact likely explains Goffman's decision to emphasize J.L. Austin's version of this project. (Duranti, 2009:24).

Once we recognize Goffman as one of the great readers in sociology, it is easy to see that his peers were likely to include the other great readers of his day: Philip Rieff, Edward Shils, Talcott Parsons and others. That some of his peers were not great readers, Blumer being one of them (see Blumer 1969), makes it easier to see why he likely held them in lower regard. Once we recognize that Goffman's sociology was made possible by his extraordinary reading, it is also possible to understand why we don't have a Goffman School of sociology today: we have some impressive and knowledgeable theorists and some impressive ethnographers but we have very few people who can practice sociology as Goffman did at the intersection of theory and ethnography.

### Goffman as Ethnographer

In a conventional sense, Goffman worked on three big ethnographic projects and he very much self-identified as an ethnographer (see Goffman 1989). His first ethnography was a study of a Scottish crofting community in the early 1950s. This became his dissertation, *Communication Conduct in an Island Community* (1953). Perhaps the single biggest impediment to the understanding of Goffman's work among the general academic community is the inaccessibility of this project. It is likely that very few people have read this dissertation. Interest in tracking it down has probably been weakened by the widespread but false belief that Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is the dissertation in book form.

Based on a year's fieldwork on the island of Unst, Goffman described everyday life on a small island with about 300 inhabitants. Goffman distinguished the 'gentry' from the 'locals' (1953:16). The gentry consisted of just two families (the Squire's and the Doctor's). The locals were all crofters. The geographically distinctive feature of the island was that it was flat with little vegetation and so the gentry and locals were often able to observe each other and to know that they were being observed.

*Communication Conduct* used a theoretical model that owed a lot to Parsons' theory of social action (1953:33-6), although he stressed that social interaction was also strategic interaction, less akin to a world at peace than to a cold war (1953:40). In Part 3 of the dissertation Goffman divided social action into the 'expressive' and the 'instrumental'. In *The Social System* (1951), which Parsons had published two years earlier, social action had been similarly divided into the expressive, the instrumental and the moral. This was itself an amendment to Weber's typology of social action as the instrumental, the substantive, the affective and the traditional. The theoretical underpinnings of *Communication Conduct* are thus Goffman's commentary on these Weberian and Parsonian themes. Parsons' own background in economics had made him sensitive to the assumption that people are utility seekers, if not utility maximizers. Goffman was also anxious to emphasize the game-theoretic elements of social life – and as with Parsons, Goffman's strategic understanding of social life was tempered by a Durkheimian recognition of the importance of ritual and social solidarity (Manning, 1992:31-6; 2005).

Goffman's first ethnography is largely unknown and unread. By contrast, his second – *Asylums* (1961) – is one of the most recognizable products of American sociology. The timing of the book was excellent: it rode the crest of the wave of an oppositional sociology that was generally anti-establishment and specifically anti-psychiatry. *Asylums* is also beautifully and cleverly written. It consists of four essays and the first three contain overlapping themes. As a whole, they describe the experiences of inmates in 'total institutions'. The 'moral careers' of these inmates involve painful and sometimes traumatic socialization and re-socialization practices that coalesce and undermine the inmates' sense of self-worth. Goffman brilliantly switched in his account between descriptions of what Garfinkel called 'degradation ceremonies' in a wide variety of settings and his own ethnographic observations of Saint Elizabeth's hospital in Washington D.C. in 1955-6. Goffman was also able to document the ways in which inmates resist institutional culture. These involve subtle insulation practices that prevent the institution from fully defining the inmates. In the third essay, Goffman considered at length the variety of 'secondary adjustments' whereby inmates prove – to themselves at least - that they still have a modicum of control over their own lives (see Manning, 2009).

The fourth essay was quite different: it consisted of a prolonged indictment of both the scientific pretensions of psychiatry and the hollow arrogance of psychiatrists who contrived to convince themselves and others that they have an understanding of mental illness that was somehow comparable to the cardiologist's understanding of heart disease. Meanwhile, Goffman thought, these psychiatrists bided their time at Saint Elizabeth's, building their resumes before retreating to a safe and lucrative private practice, where they could hand out psychoanalytic advice to the affluent worried well.

These confrontational and almost anarchic elements of *Asylums* made the project look very different from Parsons. Thus, the feeling of Goffman's second ethnography was very different from his first, with its clear allegiance to Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action. However, the political confrontations provoked by *Asylums* probably had the unfortunate consequence of masking Goffman's academic confrontation with established ethnographic practices. What I mean by this is that it was easy to miss that *Asylums* was not just an anti-psychiatry statement: it was also a new model of ethnography. To gain purchase on this idea, think about how radically new *Asylums* was when compared to a successful ethnography of his day, such as William Foote Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943). Whyte's ethnography is a memorable example of the ethnography as memoir genre, in which the ethnographer features heavily. It is also historical in its recounting of incidents over time. Similarly, Whyte introduces us to key characters whom he brings alive for us.

Goffman has none of this. There is no confessional aspect to his ethnographic work, as Van Maanen (1988) put it. In fact, Goffman is hard to find in *Asylums* or in essays using material from this ethnographic project. Occasionally he made reference to his field notes and very occasionally there are disturbing revelations (such as his aside that he observed a patient rape another patient at Saint Elizabeth's), but he is careful to keep himself out of the ethnography whenever possible.

Goffman's facts are also selected to fulfill theoretical purposes, as I have discussed recently (Manning 2016). He carried out this plan ruthlessly and it often had frustrating results. For example, in the 300 plus pages of *Asylums* Goffman did not believe that he had the space to give more than the most cursory description of his research site, its (fascinating) history or the demographics of the patients admitted there and whose experienced he described.

And so we reach the third ethnography of the trilogy. Dmitri Shalin (2016) has written a comprehensive and insightful statement of the events leading up to Goffman's third major ethnographic undertaking. Shalin's work cleverly combines Goffman's personal history with his sociological ambitions and thereby takes us closer to filling one of the major gaps in Goffman scholarship.

It is a curious trilogy from a scholarly perspective. The first ethnography is complete and available but relatively inaccessible because it was never published and so can only be accessed (at least until recently) through the University of Chicago library. The second ethnography is complete, published and one of the most well-known and widely discussed books in American sociology. The third ethnography exists as a fragment in the form of a long essay was promised as a future book Goffman did not live to write and, as Shalin (2016) shows, represents the transformation of one of Goffman's personal interests into a sociological research project.

The timeline of Goffman's conventional ethnographic work is therefore as follows:

1951-3	Ethnographic observations on the island of Unst of a crofting community;
1955-6	Ethnographic observations of Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, D.C.;
1960-3	Ethnographic observations while working as a blackjack dealer in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The resulting key publication dates are:

1953	<i>Communication Conduct in an Island Community</i> (Ph.D. dissertation);
1961	<i>Asylums</i>
1967	'Where the Action Is' in <i>Interaction Ritual</i> .

This schematic is a little misleading: Goffman also worked on a semi-ethnographic project called 'The Service Station Dealer' while in graduate school. And much later, in *Forms of Talk* (1981) he also refers to ethnographic observations made at a classic music radio station in Philadelphia. More generally, just about all of Goffman's published work drew upon these ethnographic projects – and, in a very general sense, it could be said that Goffman lived ethnographically – with the result that everything that happened to him was for him fair ethnographic game for his broad sociological and theoretical concerns. Nevertheless, I believe that it is helpful, true and instructive to pick out these three major ethnographic statements and use them to frame an analysis of Goffman's overall project. Shalin (2016) has taken us a lot closer to understanding the third, fragmentary ethnography and its significance in Goffman's work.

Shalin's paper allows us to understand the biographical and personal reasons that drew Goffman to study gambling in Las Vegas. The impetus certainly was not Parsons or Goffman's desire to extend or correct ideas in Parsons' work. Rather, Goffman simply liked playing poker (despite not being very good at it) and was fascinated by the work of mathematicians such as Edward Thorp, who proposed that blackjack was the only casino game that the player had a realistic chance to beat (Shalin 2016:19-21). Goffman's first wife also enjoyed gambling and at some point, as Shalin puts it, 'Erving's private interest merged with his professional agenda' (2016:13). Shalin cites a letter from Goffman to his former mentor, Everett Hughes, written in 1960, as a possible date when Goffman had settled on gambling as his new research venture rather than as his old time hobby (2016:13).

For unclear reasons Goffman decided that the way to conduct the project was to take the undercover role of blackjack dealer, as his correspondence with Everett Hughes confirms (this correspondence also confirms that Goffman saw Hughes as a confidante and the tone of the correspondence suggests that by 1960 Goffman saw Hughes as a colleague more than as an advisor). Shalin (2016) went to a lot of trouble to ascertain which casino Goffman worked at. Interestingly, he wasn't able to do it. In part, this is likely because it's hard to track down fifty year old employment records, especially in an industry that then had a significant Mob presence. In part, Goffman covered his tracks well. In part, sociologists (including myself) thought we knew where Goffman had worked when we really didn't. Shalin (2016:27) does mention a Symposium of Symbolic Interactionists in Las Vegas in 1999. If memory serves, one of the speakers at the event was a casino executive who remembered Goffman and might have hired him. And so the mystery might be solved if this executive can be identified by someone who still has the program from the 1999 Symposium.

It's only possible to speculate about why Goffman did not publish a book length version of the gambling ethnography after he completed the fieldwork in or around 1963 (Shalin 2016:26). Shalin suggests that it might be because he found the casino world repulsive or because he had been warned off the project by the Mob or because he was barred from Nevada casinos (2016:29). Any or all of this might be true or false. I was struck by the timeline: Goffman's wife killed herself in 1964 after a long period of mental illness (Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz, 2013:28). Also, Goffman was by the mid 1960s making significant conceptual progress with his general analysis of the 'interaction order' (a term he had first used in the conclusion to his dissertation). It is therefore possible that for personal and professional readings his ethnography of casino life simply was put on the backburner. His offhand comments about the project to Verhoeven are supportive of this interpretation but I think that we will never know for sure.

The 'approximate' ethnography of the casino that Goffman published in 1967 as a long chapter in *Interaction Ritual* is a frustrating read for people looking for Goffman's take on the Las Vegas Wild West world of the early 1960s. Instead, 'Where the Action Is' is a largely theoretical and conceptual paper. Shalin accurately describes the paper as focused on 'casino gambling as a model for risk taking in American society' (2016:28). As such, it was not a tell-all ethnography about the Mob and the casino but instead a recognition of the importance of game theory and strategic interaction for the study of society. It was more Thomas Schelling and less Jimmy the Greek.

However, the emphasis on conceptualization and classification in 'Where the Action Is' is consistent with the approach Goffman took in his two earlier ethnographies. Goffman did not break the mold when he studied casino gambling; rather he approached his work in the way he had approached the earlier projects. If we are frustrated by Goffman's ethnography it is because we want and expect him to be a certain kind of ethnographer – the kind dealing with concrete description. However, to expect that from him is to radically misunderstand the nature of his sociological project.



### Goffman as Theorist

It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that Goffman was Parsons' nemesis. Once this mistake has been made, then the choice becomes just one or the other. And it's fair to say that head to head Goffman will win. In our minds, Goffman remains the existential street fighter, hipper, smarter and more knowing than anyone else. He disliked being photographed, but the one image that he promoted shows him in a black turtleneck, as at home on the left bank of Paris where he finished up his dissertation as in Berkeley or, much later, in Philadelphia. By contrast, in our minds, Parsons was always an establishment guy, book smart, dependable in a conservative way and ponderous in action and prose. Thus, it's definitely a commitment to read *The Social System* (1951), whereas many sociologists recall reading *The Presentation of Self* (1959) as the book that first persuaded them to pursue sociology.

However, our minds play tricks on us. As discussed earlier, Goffman's dissertation (1953) contains a long discussion and endorsement of Parsons' theoretical project. In his most revealing interview, Goffman told Jeff Verhoeven very clearly that he was both an urban ethnographer and a theorist in the tradition of Parsons and Merton. Goffman's books show this too. Once the telling phrases and beautiful examples are stripped away, all of Goffman's books have Parsonian bones with (neo-Kantian) classificatory typologies. The difference might just be that in Parsons' hands they would have become items in an appendix of boxes and boxes within boxes (see Williams, 1988).

In 'The Prospects of Sociological Theory' (1950) Parsons wrote in plain English that sociological theory was simply a 'set of patterns for habitual thinking' and the task ahead was to inject an 'adequate working theoretical tradition' into the bones of empirical researchers (1950:350). This consisted of five elements: (1) a general theory of the social system, (2) a theory of motivation, (3) a comparative anthropological theory of culture, (4) the development of specific theories for empirical problem areas (i.e. theories of the middle range), and (5) the fitting of theory to operational needs (1950:351). Thus, sociological theory for Parsons developed general categories of orientation to observation and problem choice that worked in conjunction with (Mertonian) theories of the middle range. Sociological theory offers a common language to codify and interrelate empirical knowledge (1950:352-4). There is every reason to believe that Goffman was both familiar with this essay by Parsons and happy to see his own work as a contribution to this project. Recently, intellectual historians have allowed us to understand the context of Parsons' work in a new way, and this in turn can help us to understand the theoretical climate of the 1950s (see Isaac, 2010, 2012).

Shalin (2016:34) reminds us that Goffman began 'Where The Action Is' with a jokey aside about action as understood by gamblers as opposed to action understood by Parsons. However, the jokiness of the comment disguises the fact that, as Shalin also points out, Goffman understood gambling as a prototype of action, fully in the Parsonian sense (Shalin, 2016:5; Goffman, 1967:186).

Parsons' project evolved in complicated ways from *The Structure of Social Action* to *The Social System*. In some ways, these two books by Parsons represent the true emergence of autonomous sociological theory. These two books also established Durkheim and Weber as the driving force behind the emergence of sociological theory. Before Parsons, it wasn't obvious to anyone that Durkheim and Weber were the founding fathers of sociological theory, and it's not even clear whether either Durkheim or Weber thought of themselves as sociological theorists at all. Parsons proposed and established the idea that sociological theory is a separate branch of sociology, now fully enshrined in the discipline and reinforced by stand alone sociological theory classes and qualifying exams. What is clear, however, is that in the intervening years between these two great books Parsons discovered Freud and psychoanalysis. There is truth to the idea that *The Social*

*System* is Parsons' attempt to rethink the proposed convergence thesis in *The Structure of Social Action* so that it can incorporate Freud. In *The Structure of Social Action*, the earlier version of the project, Parsons used Weber and Durkheim to show that neither the more rational utility approaches of Marshall nor the less rational utility approaches of Pareto could explain why people sought this or that utility in the first place. Parsons used these two sociologists to show the two economists that norms and values pre-structure strategies to obtain utility. In *The Social System*, the later version of the project, Parsons used Freud to show that, contra Durkheim, sociology had to have a theory of motivation if it was to explain anything at all. In Parsons' hands, Freud's theory of motivation became the study of 'need-dispositions'.

Parsons was not just an ex-chemist (like Goffman) but also an ex-economist. The latter identity had a big impact on his thinking. Indeed, *The Structure of Social Action* is best read as a corrective to some of the deficiencies that Parsons thought that he had identified in the neo-Classical economic theory he identified with Alfred Marshall (John Maynard Keynes's mentor). Remembering this makes it easy to understand that (and understand why) Parsons adopted a utilitarian approach to social behavior: we are trying to maximize our utility by strategic interaction. The suggestion that Parsons thought that we are all 'cultural dopes' was unfortunate because those disinclined to read Parsons' often turgid writing could now justify their decision by quoting two words that seemed to suggest that Parsons had lost the plot. It also allows us to see that Goffman's many game-theoretic writings about strategic interaction, evident in 'Where the Action Is' as in almost all his other projects, were perfectly consistent with Parsons' own economic leanings.

*The Structure of Social Action* was not a first stab at an over-socialized model of behavior, far from it. Instead, it was an attempt to map the middle ground between what Ralph Dahendorf had famously called 'homo economicus' and 'homo sociologicus'. For Parsons, this meant that people act rationally and strategically but are influenced by prevailing norms and values.

In *The Social System* Talcott Parsons had proposed an amendment to Max Weber's typology of rational social action. As stated earlier, this amendment was prompted by his newfound appreciation for Sigmund Freud and psychoanalysis. As part of the reorientation of his 'voluntaristic theory of action' Parsons highlighted the importance of 'expressive' orders. This change made Erving Goffman's work a vital element of his revised theoretical project, as Goffman was the preeminent theorist of the rituals and rules governing the interaction order. Parsons and Goffman both knew Freud's work very well, although they disagreed about its centrality to sociology.

What is clear is that Goffman's analysis of gambling offers an interesting extension to Parsons and Merton's strain theory of deviance and social control. This is because Goffman argued that gambling (and risk-taking in general) reintroduces strain (by way of 'fatefulness') as a needed corrective to the dull predictability of affluent post-war American life. Shalin (2016:34) portrayed this extension as a radical departure from Parsons whereas I prefer to see it as a clever extension to Parsons' understanding of the nature of need-dispositions.



### Conclusions

'Where The Action Is' (1967) is a brilliant long essay about the meaning and experience of gambling and a frustrating ethnography of sorts. That is to say, it is an ethnography of gambling in the same frustrating way that *Asylums* (1961) is an ethnography of Saint Elizabeth's and that *Communication Conduct in an Island Community* (1953) is an ethnography of a Scottish crofting island. Goffman was a singular ethnographer: he rarely if ever adopted the agreed upon protocols for ethnographic research in any of his projects; he rarely offered detailed descriptions of his research sites or timelines and he himself was invisible. Personal memoir was anathema for Goffman, who was instead an ethnographer driven by theory. Many years later, Jeffrey Sallaz (2009) completed a wonderful ethnography of the social world of the blackjack dealer in Las Vegas and South Africa that had the storytelling and rich description that Goffman's earlier work lacked.

There are two different, perhaps equally important, projects that are easy to confuse. The first project follows from asking what it could mean to be Goffman today. The Goffman who studied Saint Elizabeth's Hospital in 1956 was studying an element of his world in his day. As Weber put it in his celebrated discussion of the ideal type, culture is a constantly moving stream with its own undercurrents. As a result, any analysis of it inevitably has 'eternal youth'. A lot of ethnography of our time has taken an empiricist turn. Interestingly, it has also become populist. Two of Goffman's three ethnographies failed to reach a broad audience but that does not indicate that they were less important. What is clear is that Goffman wanted both to use and to extend the habitual thinking – the theory – of sociology in his empirical investigations. Our modern day followers of Goffman can do the same. In the context of his work on gambling, this led him to consider whether gambling and risk-taking were ways of reintroducing strain in order to counteract excessive conformity and predictability. 'Where the Action is' is an ethnographic fragment and as such it does not present enough data to confirm his idea. Nevertheless, it remains powerfully suggestive.

The second project is intellectual history: it requires us to ask what Goffman's project meant to him in his day, not in ours. Recapturing Goffman's world of sociology in the 1950s, the world after the war, the world in which Everett Hughes was a key influence, the world in which sociological theory was dominated by Parsons and Merton, allows us to understand our past. It will also allow us to appreciate better the books that are Goffman's legacy to us. Joel Isaac and other intellectual historians are opening up this world. But none of this will show us how to be Goffman today, because the 'light of the great cultural problems moves on' (Weber, 1949: 112) and we have to appreciate the past while living in our present.

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