

# Doubling Down on Goffman: A Commentary on Dmitri Shalin's 'Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene'

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## Goffman: A Gambling Sociologist

Erving Goffman “was not a sociologist of any particular area” (Scheff 2006: 20). He was, in fact, a sociologist of many areas: the interaction order, stigma, “total institutions,” gender, “forms of talk,” public behaviour – and gambling certainly belongs to the list. He may be better known for these other topics, but his contributions to the sociological analysis of gambling are canonical. Thus, another sociological hat can be worn. A unique, inventive social scientist, Goffman could pull off the donning of many such hats. Bucking the standard presentation of social scientific research in journal articles, Goffman was the “master of the long essay,” a format “ungainly in the social sciences” (Handler 2012: 180; Smith and Jacobsen 2010). “Where the Action Is” (Goffman 1967) is a rich, long essay, manifesting the originality and insight found across his oeuvre. With this essay, Goffman proclaims himself a gambling romantic – situated among those sociologists and social theorists who positively valued gambling activities in the face of the levelling tendencies and utilitarian values of modern society (Walter Benjamin, George Bataille, and Roger Caillois come to mind as well). The positive valuing of gambling is clearly expressed in “Where the Action Is,” prompting Downes et al (1976: 17) to remark on the social scientific significance of the piece that it “lifts gambling out of the moral abyss into which successive generations of commentators and reformers have consigned it and renders possible a consideration of its meaning which is freed from *a priori* association of a negative kind.”

Dmitri Shalin's (2016) essay, “Erving Goffman, Fateful Action, and the Las Vegas Gambling Scene” goes a long way in clarifying the reasons why gambling informed Goffman's sociological outlook. It does this by shedding light on Goffman's “footprint in Las Vegas”—bringing it “front stage” one might say, and informing the reader also about Goffman's planned casino manuscript, the status of which is unknown. The extent of the role that gambling played in Goffman's personal and professional life, as well as the mysterious manuscript, appear to provide insight into Goffman's oeuvre, beyond the explicit discussion of gambling, risk-taking, and action in “Where the Action Is.” As Shalin discusses, Goffman was exposed to card playing and gambling from a young age, a pastime which, combined with the immigrant experience of his family, likely informed his sociological interest in outsider groups, those who have been stigmatized, and the “underlife” of institutions (Goffman 1961b).

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Readers of Shalin's essay will no doubt find their own points of interest. A couple of biographical points must be mentioned here, particularly as they are telling of Goffman the person, as well as of his sociology. Friends who played poker with Goffman knew him to be a poor player. But he was a shrewd blackjack player, successful at card-counting, earning him banishment from Vegas casinos. These facts about Goffman are not widely known among the many readers of his books. Shalin (2016: 7) notes the irony of his poor poker play; the facts are telling because they provide insight into the sociologist who, for the many who have read at least some of his work (including countless undergraduate sociology students), is known as the creator of the dramaturgical perspective, articulated in the well-known *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), with its concepts of "impression management" and "front" and "backstage." Goffman begins the book laying out the informational and semiological aspects of interaction as actors seek to "define the situation" so they "know how best to act" (1).

It is hard to imagine a game with more dramaturgical significance than poker, as players attempt to manage the intentional dimension of communication through talk or gesture – the expressions they "give," while opponents try to read the unintended messages – the tells, or what they "give off" (Goffman 1959: 2). This significance is clearly demonstrated by the widespread use of sunglasses in poker tournaments. The facts Shalin recounts are more telling and significant for those who have read "Where the Action Is" and wondered about Goffman's gambling interests. In reference to the quote Shalin (2016: 7) uses to convey the irony, it should be noted that several of Goffman's poker pals became well-known in sociology, and in the cases of David Matza and Irving Piliavin, for their contributions to the sociology of deviance. It is intriguing for the fly-on-the-wall sociologist to imagine the interactions and talk taking place at these games. As poker is mostly non-verbal or gestural, the non-talking dimension would be most intriguing. The irony, of course, was that Goffman, the coolly detached master of micro-sociological observation, was "unimpressive as an impression manager" (Shalin 11). The sociological analyst, not only of "the presentation of self," but of "fun in games" (1961a), and "strategic interaction" (1969), who, as the inventive creator of a multitude of sociological concepts and writerly expressions given, would come to be regarded as one of the most original, and literary, writers in sociology (Smith and Jacobsen 2010; Handler 2012; Watson 2015), was dramaturgically deficient when it came to expressions given off. Goffman's penchant for card-counting in Vegas casinos was thus likely a source of dramaturgical stress. Following the publication of Edward Thorp's *Beat the Dealer* in 1962, he formed a card-counting "team" (Goffman 1959: 77-105) with Ira Cisin. "Dramaturgical circumspection" (Ibid. 218) required that Cisin do the actual counting as Goffman's efforts were 'too obvious' (Shalin 25).

Shalin (29-36) discusses the formative scholarly influences on Goffman's work on games and gambling, and the intellectual milieu shaping Goffman's sociology. Goffman's work (notably in *Stigma* and *Asylums*) demonstrated the influence of labelling theory, developed by Howard Becker, Edwin Lemert, Frank Tannenbaum and others. The rise of labelling theory and symbolic interactionism ("liberal" sociological perspectives) stood in contrast to the "Calvinist" functionalism of Talcott Parsons (Ibid: 19), which reigned over American sociology in the 1940s and 50s. Goffman was a severe critic of American functionalism (Ibid) but a self-proclaimed Durkheimian (Goffman 1959). Goffman's (1967) sociological conception of "action" showed his difference from functionalism. Action was to be found amongst those who chose risky activities (in whatever sphere of life) rather than conformity and safe living. Goffman was ingenious at generating concepts to serve his analyses (producing many famous ones, such as "total institution," "spoiled identity," "facework," etc.), often rehabilitating native terms to serve as analytic terms (Scheff 2006; Handler 2012). Goffman (1967: 186) states that the phenomenon of "action" he wants to study is derived from the world of gambling: "gambling is the

prototype of action.” Goffman’s “action” signifies an epistemological and methodological challenge to functionalism: it is “experience near” compared to the “experience distant” conception of action offered in Parsons’ functionalism (Handler 2012: 182). As Shalin makes clear, Goffman was personally immersed in gambling and sociologically interested in the topic: his methodological proclivities and experience-near epistemology demonstrated a sociological closeness to the materials to be studied—a sociology close to the action. This is revealed in his participant observation research as a card dealer in Las Vegas and as an orderly in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital (Goffman 1961b), although, as Shalin (2016: 31-32) observes, there would be ethical-methodological limitations placed upon Goffman’s approach today.

Shalin emphasizes bringing together biography, history, and theory in his discussion of Goffman’s theory of action (Ibid: 4). There are echoes here of C. Wright Mills’ (1959) classic conception of the “sociological imagination,” and its basis in the bringing together of “biography and history.” Mills, a contemporary of Goffman, also savagely critiqued Parsonian functionalism. However, reading the story Shalin lays out, it is possible to hear echoes of sociologist Robert Merton, Parsons’ famous student.

Among other influential sociological contributions, Merton (1968) is known for his strain (also anomie) theory of deviance (its earliest formulation was published in 1938), which explains deviance (strain) in terms of differential opportunities to cultural goals as shaped and distributed by social structure. The theory presents a schema with “modes of adaptation” representing actor orientations to stipulated cultural goals. Those with legitimate means to achieve cultural goals demonstrate “conformity” while those who lack such means engage in “innovation.” Merton postulated the main cultural goal in American society as material success. Innovation occurs when there are socially-structured obstacles to goals: deviance and crime are thus resorted to in order to achieve the goals. Goffman’s “Where the Action Is” offers some parallels: in the section prior to the discussion of action, (1967: 174-181), Goffman discusses various “adaptations” to fatefulness (did he borrow the term from Merton?), including, for example, a lifestyle that embraces “uneventfulness”:

Yet there are many good reasons to take comfort in this uneventfulness and seek it out, voluntarily foregoing practical gambles along with risk and opportunity – the opportunity if only because it is so often related to the risk. The question is one of security. In uneventful situations, courses of action can be managed reliably and goals progressively and predictably realized. By such self-management the individual allows others to build him into their own plans in an orderly and effective way. The less uncertain his life, the more society can make use of him. (Goffman 1967: 174)

Where Merton discusses “social structure,” Goffman refers to “society”: in any case the actor oriented to uneventfulness very much resembles the Mertonian conformist. While there are some similarities between Merton’s “innovation” and Goffman’s “action” (particularly if action is of the criminal variety), Goffman’s “action” covers a broader range of social orientations, illegal and legal (including risky occupations and pastimes), and stresses the meaning and value of action itself for the social actor.

Merton’s theory sought to explain, among other aspects of American society, features of the immigrant experience in terms of achieving social and economic integration. Reading about Goffman’s family and relatives, their cultural (i.e. Eastern European Jewish) propensity for card playing and gambling, their entrepreneurial efforts, and Goffman’s apparent underworld connection, brings to mind “innovation.” Further, Goffman’s card-counting, stimulated by Thorp’s *Beat the Dealer* (1962), and his banishment from Vegas

casinos demonstrates his own innovative orientations, his desire for “action.” However, while Shalin (2016: 27) notes that Goffman was “reticent about the macro-implications of his work,” it is possible to read Goffman’s work as responding to aspects of social structure at the time, and to changes that were occurring. One of Goffman’s earliest publications, “Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure” (1952) took the “cooling out” practice of confidence men and saw its applications in legitimate society. Colin Sumner (1994: 208) remarks on this:

Goffman...in effect adroitly conceptualized what was going on American society as ‘cooling out the mark’... Blumer had already alerted us to the importance of the explosive and sensitive process whereby respectable identity was transformed into deviance, but Goffman gave the account an edge by comparing such transformative processes to the ways that confidence men cooled out their mark before taking it to the cleaners – the laundry business had long been in the hands of the mob, that paragon of the new, conservative, confidence. Again, gambling provided Goffman’s main illustration.

When Goffman gambled in Nevada, there was no other place to ply his card-counting trade. Differently put, Las Vegas for Goffman, and for other gamblers, card-counters, and confidence men (not to mention the mob), provided “opportunity structures” in the face of a conformist America that was nevertheless changing (Merton 1959). For Sumner (1994: 208), 1950s “Las Vegas came to symbolize the full absorption of deviance into ‘the system.’”

However, Shalin (8) reminds the reader of the place of gambling and risk-taking in the “national idiom.” So despite the official condemnatory view of gambling in America’s cultural past, it has nevertheless been part of its spirit. As successful academic, stock-market player, and early on, dealer-beater, Goffman was living the American Dream. Shalin’s discussion (Ibid: 25-27) of the parallels between “legitimate” and underworld business enterprises in American history also confirms a point Merton (1968: 195), writing in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, makes about the cultural goal of wealth in American society: “in our competitive society...wealth has taken on a highly symbolic cast.” Aware of “morally dubious innovations” in pursuit of this goal, Merton says, it is the “sacrosanct goal that virtually consecrates the means” (Ibid: 196).

If Goffman was willing to take advantage of opportunities to beat the dealers in 1950s Las Vegas, his sociological proclivities nevertheless saw him attuned to the changes occurring in post-war America. Goffman was at his most productive, and rose to fame, in the 1960s (most notably following the publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Asylums*). Indeed some consider Goffman a sociologist of the 1960s (Lemert 1997: xxiii). However, as Lemert (1997: xxi) makes the case, Goffman’s sociology came of age in the 1940s and 50s, his graduate work at the University of Chicago (“a school at odds with the then dominant professional schools at Columbia and Harvard”) occurring “during the absolute high water mark of sociology in America.” Further, despite the dominance of functionalism, the 1950s saw a variety of publications that presented sociological criticism of American society with its stultifying norms, bureaucratic alienation, and hypocritical authorities (e.g. “David Riesman’s *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), C. Wright Mills’ *White Collar* (1951), William Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956), John Keats’s *Crack in the Picture Window* (1957), and Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957),” (Lemert 1997: xxiv)). This milieu helped to form Goffman’s sociological antennae as he went on to coolly analyze the “constructed” social realities of 1960s America (Lemert xxxvii).

### Doubling Down on Goffman

Shalin's essay is timely, in part because commentaries on, and applications of, Goffman's work are proliferating (Scheff 2006; Cosgrave 2008; Jacobsen 2010; Edgely 2013). Further, as Shalin (1) argues "the theory of fateful action presented in the seminal study, 'Where the Action Is' remains a potent if underutilized theoretical, methodological, and political resource." Indeed given changes in social structure (i.e. the effects of globalization, deindustrialization, etc.) it is difficult to argue with this, and a brief discussion of this point is provided below. With respect to the world of gambling in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, we can double down on Goffman and say that his *whole body of work* can be brought to bear on contemporary gambling: its interaction orders, organizational and institutional shaping, dramaturgical performances, modes of stigmatization, definitional frames, etc.

Indeed, as the world of legal gambling has changed immensely since Goffman's card dealing and research time in Las Vegas, so in a sense has the character (and definitions) of gambling interaction changed, influenced by the ubiquity of contemporary gambling enterprises, technologies, environments, and spaces. Goffman's dramaturgical approach was undoubtedly oriented to face-to-face interaction, but it is important to remember that his researches were also very much interested in the ways in which settings and institutions shaped the course of interactions, whether in the casino where "character" was displayed, or the asylum (Goffman 1961b), where mortifications of the self occurred.

As such, the contemporary world of legal gambling offers many possibilities for Goffman-influenced analyses. His books and essays offer a variety of analytical metaphors, concepts, and frames (Goffman 1974) that can enrich gambling studies. Following Goffman's lead will require inventive thinking. The technological configuring of gambling games and their shaping of gamblers' choices, actions, and behaviours (Cosgrave 2010; Schüll 2012; Shalin 2016: 29) is an area that gambling research could pursue. How, for example, would a Goffmanian approach address the interactions between social actors and technologically- and psychologically- sophisticated electronic gaming machines? How is the self constituted and dramaturgically enacted here? Some contemporary work has been done applying Goffman to interactions with mobility devices and social media, so the area of electronic and virtual gambling forms lies open to Goffmanian analyses (Jenkins, 2010; Ling 2010). Many other facets of gambling open themselves for analysis. How might a Goffmanian approach address the interactions and performances generated by sports betting, scratch game, or lottery ticket play? How do (post-)modern casino environments shape interactions and self-performances? The study of these phenomena will require inventive, creative thinking, and this was always one of the hallmarks of Goffman's work as a sociologist.

Shalin's point that Goffman's "theory of fateful action... remains a potent if underutilized...resource" merits some comment. Goffman's theorization of action took place when, in his view, the opportunities for fateful action in society were in steep decline. For Goffman, casino gambling and the vicarious experiences provided by the mass media were compensatory experiences for the withering of action and fatefulness. The spread of legal gambling since Goffman's Las Vegas experiences in the late 1950s and 60s, would not have changed his mind, especially since gambling is mass-marketed now as a form of entertainment. This position is debatable to some extent, since, as with the widespread popularity of No Limit Texas Hold' em poker, there is no shortage of opportunities to engage in "edgework" and display character (Lyng 2005, 2014). Further, since Goffman's time we have seen the emergence of the "problem" and "pathological" gambler as medical categories that have developed alongside expanded and commercialized gambling markets (Cosgrave 2010). These developments



raise Goffmanian concerns. Shalin (2016: 30) remarks that “Goffman is mum about compulsive gambling,” failing to discuss the “delusions and...self-destructive habits” of some gamblers, and that this “is a serious gap in the paradigm of fateful action.” One reason for this may well be that, unlike today, compulsive gambling had not become the pervasive, medicalized category that “pathological” gambling has become since the latter’s inclusion in the DSM-III in 1980, with its (and “problem gambling’s”) subsequent discursive spread alongside the expansion of legal markets (Cosgrave 2010). Thus, we can propose the idea of a conceptual or classificatory career, paralleling Goffman’s own analysis of “moral career” (Goffman 1961b). Goffman made no bones about his anti-psychiatry, stated explicitly in *Asylums* (1961b: x) and made it clear that his study was going to take the position of the inmates. Goffman, like other writers in the 1960s and 70s, such as Thomas Szasz, Ivan Illich, Ernest Becker, and Irving Zola, was a harsh critic of medicalization, seeing it as a form of social control with the power to alter self-conceptions (Goffman 1961b). In *Asylums*, as with *Stigma*, Goffman articulated the position of the marginalized and labelled—against the institutional authority of the psychiatrists in the former and the social-interactional authority of the “normals” in the latter (Goffman, 1963). Thus, if in “Where the Action Is,” Goffman wanted to rehabilitate gambling for its sociological significance and champion the gamblers, in *Stigma* he sympathizes with the stigmatized segments of society, including “drug addicts, delinquents, criminals... (and) gamblers...” (Goffman 1963: 143-144). There is no reason to think that Goffman would not have viewed today’s “problem” or “pathological” gamblers as the casualties of contingent labelling processes, subject to the vicissitudes of a particular “moral career” (Goffman 1961b). We might well wonder how Goffman would have analyzed the “cooling out” practices, directed at consumers of mass-marketed gambling, that have accompanied the expansion of legal gambling activities, particularly with respect to governments, who, aside from their power to legalize gambling, have played a significant role in the development and expansion of “legitimate” gambling markets in order to procure revenues (Cormack and Cosgrave 2013). Aside from official moral admonitions to gamble “responsibly,” it certainly helps that gambling revenues are “framed” (Goffman 1974) as contributing to the “public good.”

Given Goffman’s celebration of action and character in “Where the Action Is,” if by way of lament at the decline of the possibilities for “the occurrence of fatefulness of the serious, heroic, and dutiful kind” (Goffman 1967: 193), and given his own commitment to beating the dealer, he no doubt saw in gambling an agonistic outlet, fitting his own masculinist values (Scheff 2006: 12-13, 162). Thus, one wonders what Goffman would have thought of the compulsive gamblers in the Las Vegas casinos he dealt cards to or sat beside playing blackjack. Shalin (2016: 28) suggests the “momentous changes that have transformed the entertainment and gaming industry call for further investigation into the evolving status of fateful action.” Goffman celebrates action against the safe and momentless; widespread electronic gambling now however appears to work against the idea of action, in that player behaviour is being shaped and solicited for “time on device,” so that what is sought is the technologically-induced “zone” (Woolley and Livingstone, 2010; Schüll 2012). Indeed, such gaming-experiential notions as the zone indicate that gambling practices can be usefully analyzed in terms of changing definitional frames. As suggested, the technological shaping of gambling offerings is an area where Goffman’s theorizations could be brought to bear. The interactions of gamblers with various gaming screens (EGMs, etc.) and simulations in the casino and elsewhere partake of the broader cultural manifestation of human- screen interaction so prevalent today and deserving of more sociological scrutiny.

### Action and “practical gambles”

Shalin (2016: 46) remarks that “Goffman’s enduring contribution to the study of gambling owes much to his determined effort to breach the wall between betting practices in entertainment venues and risk-taking in society at large...”. Goffman made it clear that, whether individuals sought action or not, life was full of occasions where “practical gambles” (Goffman 1967: 170) occurred. As mentioned, Goffman’s oeuvre provides a rich variety of perspectives (e.g. dramaturgy, game, frame) and concepts that could serve in the analysis of gambling, while the notion of “practical gambles” could serve as the basis for analysis of those social actions and practices in everyday life that structurally resemble gambles. Aside from the explicit focus on action in “Where the Action Is,” Goffman illustrated his analyses of various aspects of the interaction order with gambling-related examples, found throughout his oeuvre, from the early *Encounters* (1961a) to *Frame Analysis* (1974). A Goffmanian sociology of gambling can thus illuminate the place of gambling and its various social analogues in everyday life, as well as the ways in which gambling activities and “practical gambles” are organizationally and institutionally shaped.

It is true, as Shalin (2016: 27) indicates, that Goffman did not have much to say about “the macro-implications of his findings,” nor was his analytical focus on (macro-) social structure. The widespread legalization and expansion of gambling indicates a changed social structure compared to Goffman’s Las Vegas era, affected by globalizing processes. In North America, factors such as deindustrialization and economic neoliberalism have influenced the social milieu within which gambling enterprises and opportunities have expanded. Some thinkers have termed the present period the “risk society” (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). Evidence of this is found in the risks posed by climate change, and by the effects that global financial markets are having on everyone’s lives, brought to the fore by the 2008 financial crisis. No doubt there are more opportunities to gamble legally than ever, as processes of “Las Vegasization” (Kingma 2010) have made gambling easily accessible for most people in North America and other jurisdictions. But the “risk society” suggests that risk has become a conceptual filter for understanding our relationship to the world. In “Where the Action Is” Goffman (1967: 155-156) referred to occasions such as “taking one job instead of another,” where the “individual makes bets and takes chances in regard to daily living.” Such “practical gambles,” in contrast to casino gambles, manifested their consequentiality only after an extended passage of time. For the risk society theorists, late modern cultural conditions have produced the self as a “reflexive project” (Giddens 1991; Scott 2007). Under these conditions, “Leaving home, getting a job, becoming unemployed, forming a new relationship, facing an illness, and so on, all pose risks and choices that must be reflexively negotiated...(thus) strategic life planning becomes a major source of anxiety” (Scott 2007: 101; Giddens 1991). Goffman’s conception of “practical gambles,” as well as his dramaturgical formulation of a reflexive, impression managing self (1959), are precursors to themes discussed by the risk society theorists. However, social structure and cultural conditions have changed since Goffman’s time. Indeed, if “the evolving status of fateful action” (Shalin 2016: 28) deserves greater attention, we might look no further than the (dis)organizing features of everyday life itself to see the unfolding fateful consequences of people’s choices and decisions, where it seems “ontological security” (Giddens 1991) may not be as assured as it may have been in earlier prosperous times. Goffman (1967: 201) wrote that, for those “individuals strongly oriented to action...chance is not only sought out but carved out”; however, the uncertainties of late modernity suggest that action, or at any rate risks, may be foisted upon us at any time, whether we desire them or not.

## Conclusion

Goffman may have followed a conventional professional career path as an academic, even if his fame was quickly accrued and atypical. He was nevertheless a sociological innovator and risk-taker, and indeed sociology and social science more generally has been made much richer through his inventive, insightful work. Shalin has shone considerable light on Goffman's world, in particular his personal and professional desire to find the action and reveal its sociological meanings and implications: a world where action, character, consequentiality, and fatefulness are crucial concepts for understanding human social experience.

For Goffman-ophiles, scholars, and sociologists of gambling, Goffman's casino manuscript remains an intriguing mystery; however, Shalin indicates that we may yet come to know Goffman's reasons for suspending his casino research. In the meanwhile, a great service to Goffman scholarship has been performed here: Shalin's "backstage" work in the Erving Goffman Archives has paid off in spades.



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