

# Goffman, Action, and Risk Society: Aesthetic Reflexivity in Late Modernity

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When I decided to write about edgework over twenty-five years ago, I had no idea that I had put myself on a pathway of sustained engagement with one of the most important sociologists of the twentieth century. As an academic sociologist in the early stages of my career, I felt that I had a good general understanding of Erving Goffman's most important ideas and a proper appreciation of his unique contributions to my discipline. Although I had a certain affinity for Goffman's brand of sociology, I deliberately avoided pressure from close friends and colleagues to become a "Goffmaniac," the kind of disciple that Goffman's work often seems to inspire. However, when I took up the task of formulating a theoretical explanation of volitional risk taking, I had no choice but to dig more deeply into Goffman's work, in particular, his famous essay entitled *Where the Action Is* (1967), which at that time was one of the very few sociological theories of risk-taking behavior. The most immediate result of this excavation was a better understanding of the theoretical differences between my concept of edgework and Goffman's notion of action, but the long term consequence was a profound appreciation of the power and relevance of Goffman's ideas for making sense of the contemporary social world.

This appreciation of Goffman's work has been enhanced in recent years by my emersion in a body of theory and research that offers a unique perspective on the emerging social conditions that account for the growing relevance of Goffman's theory of action. The work of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, and their collaborators on risk society and reflexive modernization has given me a deeper understanding of the importance of risk and uncertainty as central problems faced by members of twenty-first century global society. Moreover, the risk society perspective has directly impacted my own research by raising an intriguing question: In a world in which everyone is forced to contend with new global risks and expanding uncertainties in everyday life, why do increasing numbers of people seem to find pleasure and satisfaction in taking *unnecessary* risks? In accordance with the organizing theme of the Special Issue, my paper addresses this question by exploring potentially useful links between Goffman's ideas on risk and fatefulness and core ideas of the risk society perspective. I will argue that if we live in a risk society and culture today—and I think we do—then Goffman's theory of action captures social processes that are critically important for ensuring the continued reproduction of the social order, processes that are presently not theorized within the risk society perspective.

In developing this argument, I will begin by identifying some key convergences between Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and general ideas on risk society and reflexive modernization deriving from the distinctive theoretical programs advanced by Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1990, 1991). These convergences create the possibility of a conceptual integration of Goffman's theory of action and major elements of the risk society framework. Next, I explain how such an integration is possible considering that Goffman's theory of action (published in 1967) is oriented to

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social conditions prevailing in mid-twentieth century U.S. society while the risk society perspective refers to globalized social relations of the twenty-first century. Here, I will assert that the ontological issues that inspired Goffman's theoretical reflections on voluntary risk taking behavior ("action") have become even more significant in recent decades, which gives his theory of action greater purchase on contemporary social conditions than the social circumstances of his own time. I then move to a discussion of Scott Lash's work on "risk culture" (2000) and "aesthetic reflexivity" (1993) to lay the conceptual foundation for orienting Goffman's ideas on action to the processes of reflexive modernization described by Beck, Giddens, and Lash (1994). Finally, I explain how "action" and "character," as Goffman conceived of these terms, are related to important motivational and emotional resources involved in the reproduction of social relations in world of expanding risk and uncertainty.

### **Beck, Giddens, and Goffman on Risk and Reflexivity**

With the publication in the early 1990s of Ulrich Beck's (1992) and Anthony Giddens' (1990; 1991) works on the historical trajectory of the project of modernity, the intellectual world was presented with a highly original stream of sociological theory that has stimulated a large amount of debate and scholarship in the last twenty-five years. While this body of work has raised many provocative issues for social and cultural inquiry, it has been particularly effective in expanding awareness of the consequences we face today living in a world of unprecedented global risks and increasing social and personal uncertainties. The theoretical program that Beck and Giddens initiated is complex and each theorist embraces different core assumptions and addresses a distinctive set of concerns, so I will not attempt a comprehensive review of their respective approaches to the study of risk and uncertainty here. At this point in the analysis, I will only highlight the common general themes that emerge from their frameworks in order to demonstrate how their ideas on late modernity and reflexive modernization overlap with Goffman's theoretical concerns and concepts. A more detailed discussion of certain key concepts from Giddens' theory of reflexive modernization will be presented later.

While the classical sociological theorists articulated the social, economic, and cultural logics of the modern world in ways that established the conceptual foundations for the discipline of sociology, many contemporary theorists have questioned the relevance of the classical canon to social conditions unfolding in recent decades. Beck and Giddens belong to this critical movement, but where some theorists see the curtain coming down on modernity with the rise of the radically different social and cultural logics of postmodernity, Beck and Giddens assert that the epic story of modernity has entered its second act. This shift, driven by the processes of "reflexive modernization," is marked by the move from the industrial social order of the first modernity to the "world risk society" of the second modern era (Beck 1999). Although the transition to second modernity is associated with many institutional and existential changes highlighted by postmodern and other historical/comparative perspectives, Beck and Giddens propose that most of these changes are best contextualized in terms of the increasing significance of new global risks, existential uncertainties, and reflexive social processes.

One distinctive characteristic of risks in the late modern era is the fact that they are associated with a form of "systemic-reflexivity" involving a "recursive turning of modernity upon itself" (Lynch 2000:28). As modern scientific rationality is put to the task of controlling the dangers that have traditionally threaten human-kind (e.g., starvation, deprivation, natural disaster, attack from one's enemies), new more complex hazards are created that resist our efforts to control them (e.g., pesticides, over-consumption, the damming of rivers, nuclear weapons). One consequence of such systemic-reflexivity is growing doubt about the value of science and industry as the lay public has become increasingly aware of these new global risks. A growing suspicion of science can be found among lay persons who must deal in very personal ways with

the limitations and negative consequences of scientifically-based interventions into their lives—e.g., the chemical contamination of their living environments, the iatrogenic consequences of medical scientific treatments, and the increasingly contradictory and ambiguous findings (especially those related to individual health and wellbeing) that result from the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

A further effect of reflexive modernization is to *detraditionalize* the ways of living built into industrial society (Beck, 1992:153). The detraditionalization process occurs on many different levels and contributes to the decline of a wide range of social certainties within first modern industrial society, including class conflict, the nuclear family, nation-state, the standard gender roles of industrial society, and Fordist production. Thus, under conditions of reflexive modernization, the established ontological and institutional boundaries of industrial society begin to dissolve and the “either/or” logic of first modernity is superseded by a new logic of “both/and” as people begin to manage boundaries in flexible and pragmatic ways (Beck and Lau, 2005:527). In addition, individuals increasingly reject pre-given, standard biographies and construct their own biographies by assuming mutable and multiple subjectivities (Tulloch and Lupton, 2003:4). The result is “a social structure in the process of becoming more fluid and individualized” as people look for greater flexibility in how they organize family relations, friendship networks, working hours, and couple relationships (Beck and Lau, 2005:530).

In documenting these dramatic alterations in the structural configurations of industrial society and the conditions of daily living and personal experience, theorists of reflexive modernization direct attention to the obvious fact that the social universe we occupy today is more contingent and unpredictable than ever before. However, in addition to reporting what many other commentators on contemporary social life have observed, Beck and Giddens point out that the “confrontation with contingency” is not a unique feature of our present way of life. Rather, it is the defining feature of the modern life *in general*, from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present. Thus, in the transition from the pre-modern to the modern social universe, the *natural order* of traditional societies gave way to a *natural contingency* ordered by both the individual and the collective subject (Lash, 1993:5). Modernist social philosophers have expressed this basic theme in a variety of ways: the chaos of “war of all against all” ordered by the collective subject in the form of the state (Hobbes); the indeterminacy of existential reality ordered by the subject’s universal cognitive categories (Kant); and the contingent plasticity of human beings ordered by specific choices that the individual subject must make in every sphere of daily life (Smith). Consequently, if dealing with contingency is the central imperative of the modern life, then the critical issue in distinguishing one historical phase from another is *not* the degree of contingency that exists in social relations, but the nature of individual and collective *responses* to contingency. For Beck and Giddens, focusing on how subjects respond to contingency is what allows us to fully grasp the importance of reflexivity in the modernization process (captured by the term “reflexive modernization”) and to make meaningful distinctions between early, late, and post modernity.

So what is the meaning of reflexivity in this framework? For Beck and Giddens, reflexivity is best understood as involving various forms of “self-monitoring” (Giddens, 1990:36). However, the “self” in self-monitoring refers not just to individuals but also to entire systems, which leads to a further specification of reflexivity in terms of the distinction between *individual* and *systemic* reflexivity. The key point is that self-monitoring at both the individual and systemic levels is oriented most fundamentally to the problem of controlling contingency. Thus, in early (simple) modernity of industrial society, the contingencies of life are controlled at the systemic level through various expressions of the “insurance principle” (welfare state, social insurance, and private insurance) and at the individual level by the “choices” people make—in relation to the “opportunity costs” incurred for options not chosen—about such things such as one’s

occupation, opposite-sex marital partner, family size, and friendship relations. By contrast, in late (reflexive) modernity of the risk society, the insurance principle is no longer sufficient for the type and magnitude of the risks that human populations face (how do we insure against the harms of nuclear war?) and therefore reflexivity in the late modern context becomes radicalized. Specifically, Beck sees self-monitoring at the systemic level occurring in the form of new social movements devoted to the rational critique of science from the perspectives of popularized knowledge, while Giddens emphasizes self-monitoring mediated by expert systems in a reflexive process he terms as the “double hermeneutic” (Giddens, 1987). At the individual level, this involves the use of the therapeutic resources generated by the psychological sciences and disseminated through the popularization of personal therapy, self-help manuals, and the like. This form of reflexivity radicalizes individual choice: now, individuals not only make choices about career paths or family size; they also choose particular self-identities and construct biographies to match these chosen identities.

While there is much more to the risk society perspective than I can discuss here, the preceding overview should be sufficient for the principal task of this section, which is to demonstrate the conceptual convergences between Beck and Giddens’ ideas on reflexive modernization and Goffman’s theorizing on risk and reflexivity. Where these two theoretical perspectives converge most directly is in their respective understanding of the “self” as an emergent of a reflexive process. As I have demonstrated, Giddens’ version of the reflexive self focuses on the double hermeneutic of individuals employing expert knowledge (i.e., the psychological sciences) as a resource for constructing a more desirable self, such that individual selves are ultimately mediated by professional knowledge on the development and maintenance of the self. In contrast to Giddens’ phenomenological approach to the reflexive self, Goffman’s conception is firmly rooted in the interactionist tradition. Following the lead of the American pragmatists, especially George Herbert Mead’s ideas on the interactional foundation of meaning and the self, Goffman conceives of the self as a reflexive emergent of interaction between actor and audience. By asserting that the self does not exist apart from the interaction of actor and audience, Goffman proposes a radically reflexive conception of the self. If at a basic level reflexivity involves some form of *mediation* of everyday experience (Lash, 1994:140), then Goffman calls attention to the way in which actors’ self-presentations are mediated by the responses of audiences to these dramatic performances. Thus, Goffman’s notion of the reflexive self—subject making an object of itself—is thoroughly interactional: in the context of face-to-face interaction, the self-presentations of subjects are objectified in the responses of others, which then recursively act back on the subjects who initiate these self-presentations. We see then that the notion of the reflexive self is an important conceptual link between the theory of reflexive modernization and Goffman’s dramaturgical model, although each perspective emphasizes a different form of reflexivity, which I address below in terms of the distinction between “cognitive” and “aesthetic” reflexivity.

If it is possible to connect Goffman’s work to the risk society perspective through the concept of the reflexive self, a second important conceptual convergence can be identified involving the previously mentioned “problem of contingency.” Goffman’s concern with this issue is not as apparent in his scholarship as other theoretical issues most often associated with his work, but it occupies a more important place in his general framework than most sociologists realize. As followers of Goffman’s work are well aware, the problems of unpredictability, uncertainty, and risk are addressed most explicitly in his famous essay *Where the Action Is* (1967). Based on observations deriving from his lifelong fascination with gambling and other forms of voluntary risk taking, as well as a contested account of his involvement in a participant-observational study of gambling as a Las Vegas casino dealer (see Shalin, this issue), Goffman proposed a theoretical explanation of “action,” which he defined as behavior that

is “problematic, consequential, and undertaken for what is felt to be its own sake” (1967:185). Goffman’s way of accounting for the pursuit of action, with his sophisticated treatment of the seemingly dubious connection between voluntary risk taking behavior and morally-significant qualities that define a person’s “character,” is the part of his analysis that has received the most attention from laypersons and scholars (c.f. Katz, 1988). However, there is another dimension of the theory of action that has not been as widely acknowledged or understood as a crucial part of the explanation of voluntary risk taking. In this part of the analysis, Goffman takes us out of the realm of actor-audience interaction to engage with a problem that emerges at the systemic level. The structural problem of concern to him here is a key issue for all modernist sociological theory, best captured by posing the following question: “In the modern age of natural contingency, how is the problem of social order solved?” Once again, what makes his answer to this question particularly creative and powerful is his ability develop this apparently incongruous proposition: Individuals who take unnecessary risks contribute important resources for controlling contingency in the social world and therefore play an important role reproducing the social order. As we will see below, this proposition is especially relevant for understanding the social reproduction in the age of the risk society. In order to develop this argument, however, we must first consider the contrast between the social conditions of mid-twentieth century U.S. society—the societal referent of Goffman’s theorizing about risk taking and contingency—and the social conditions of the contemporary twenty-first century risk society.

### **Fatefulness and Risk Society**

As noted above, Goffman’s most immediate goal in the essay *Where the Action Is (WAI)* was to account for participation in “action”—behavior that is problematic, consequential, and undertaken for what is felt to be its own sake. In addition to his celebrated ability to capture the taken-for-granted nuances of human interaction and self-presentation, Goffman’s theoretical work is noteworthy for the systematic approach he takes to constructing his conceptual frameworks. So in *WAI*, we find him carefully building up to his core concept of “action,” which is not discussed until the middle of this lengthy essay, by engaging in a detailed exploration of each of the conceptual components of action. He begins by examining the “problematic” dimension of action by devoting several pages to the nature of chance-taking and gambles—reviewing well-established concepts such as theoretical versus given odds, expected value, the concept of risk, etc. Next, he adds complexity to our understanding of chance-taking by considering the importance of “consequentiality” in individual decisions about gambles, which yields a more sociologically-informed perspective on risk-taking. However, the most important section of the first half of the essay, in terms of understanding Goffman’s sensitivity to the “problem of contingency” and the social-historical specificity of his theory, is the section dealing with “fatefulness.” Consequently, I will give more detailed attention to his discussion of this concept.

In the simplest terms, the concept of “fatefulness” refers to a particular expression of problematic and consequential activities. Any activity that is simultaneously highly problematic (uncertain) *and* highly consequential (influencing objectively the later life of the individual) can be termed as “fateful” (1967:164). Although Goffman’s primary goal is to explain *voluntary* participation in fateful activities such as “practical gambles” (risk taking for material gain) and “action” (risk taking for its own sake), he demonstrates a keen awareness of the degree to which contingency and fatefulness are endemic to the human condition. “Adventitious fatefulness” can be found in the unexpected twists and turns of daily life deriving from the inherent uncertainties of living in complex natural and social worlds. Fatefulness is also traceable to the basic vulnerability of the human body which, as “a piece of consequential equipment,” is subject to many potential sources of serious illness or injury (1967:167). However, the type of fatefulness that is most

central to Goffman's analysis involves the potentially consequential uncertainties that one confronts in social situations of co-presence: "Just as the individual always brings his (sic) body into every occasion of his activity . . . , so he brings himself as an upholder of conduct standards like physical adeptness, honesty, alertness, piety, and neatness. The record of an individual's maintenance of these standards provides a basis others use for imputing a personal make-up to him [and] they employ this characterization in determining how to treat him—and this is consequential" (1967:167). Since social situations offer opportunities for presenting favorable or unfavorable information about oneself, they are intrinsically risky and are often a source of fatefulness. Thus, Goffman is alert to the special challenge that every human being confronts in finding ways to manage the multitude of contingencies associated with vulnerable bodies, emergent social interactions, and existential uncertainties.

While Goffman's reflections on these sorts of contingencies may be relevant to all human societies, other parts of his discussion reveal the historical specificity of his conception of fatefulness. In a particularly revealing passage (1967:161-164), he employs the distinction between "time off" and "time on" to describe the true nature of fatefulness. When individuals are free of institutionally determined responsibilities associated with participation in paid employment, family life, and civic association (i.e., during "time off"), they have the luxury to "kill time" in activities of their own choosing. Since the range of options for killing time are almost unlimited, time off periods are usually problematic (characterized by uncertainty), but the choices made during these times are not likely to be consequential. In contrast, the institutionally-determined character of "time-on" activities involve the opposite combination of uncertainty and consequentiality—they can be highly consequential but are rarely problematic, since the routines of work, family life, and civic association leave little room for free choice in how responsibilities are fulfilled. Goffman's point in drawing this distinction is to highlight the rare instances of truly fateful experience in the institutional realm—the combination of uncertainty and consequentiality found only in the pursuit of "practical gambles" and "action."

So we find a certain bipolarity in Goffman's analysis of fatefulness. On the one hand, he demonstrates his concern with the natural contingency of human experience, especially within the context of face-to-face interaction. As we will see, the problem of controlling contingency in social situations becomes an explicit theme in his theory of action. On the other hand, he also reveals his theoretical predisposition to the social order of mid-twentieth century U.S. society with his claim that fatefulness is relatively rare in a social system where institutional routines dominate in work, family life, and most other social institutions. It is precisely this bipolarity in Goffman's approach to fatefulness that supports my claim that his theory of action has even greater relevance for the risk society of the twenty-first century than it does for the social world of Goffman's own time. While fatefulness may not have been a characteristic of institutional activities in Goffman's time, we have seen that fatefulness pervades almost every institutional domain of the contemporary social world—in the increasing uncertainties and insecurities in the realm of work, in the dramatic changes in how families are constituted, in the expanding choices available for performing gender roles and arranging intimate relationships, and the other changes described in my earlier discussion of risk society. As I argue below, in the context of a world where risk and uncertainty have become more prominent aspects of social life than they were in Goffman's time, his insights about the role of action-seeking in controlling contingency and reproducing the social order are more relevant than ever. However, one more preliminary step is required before this argument can be fully developed—we must consider a modification of the risk society approach that gives greater attention to the *cultural* dimensions of risk and uncertainty.

### Risk Culture and Aesthetic Reflexivity

As an early contributor to the development of the reflexive modernization thesis, Scott Lash (1993, 1994, 2000) has taken the risk society perspective in some promising new directions. Lash's response to the risk society model is informed by his engagement with the cultural studies literature, which has shifted the sociological focus away from traditional concerns with production and social class to "cultural" practices in the realms of consumption, leisure, and media. Although Lash is generally sympathetic with Beck and Giddens' ideas on reflexive modernization, he complains that they fail to appreciate the extent to which *information and communication structures* have displaced social structures that have been receding under the influence of reflexive modernization (Lash, 1994:111). Thus, he boldly asserts that "the risk society that emerges from an industrial society is in a relatively fast decline ... [and it is] risk cultures which seem to be the emergent present ..." (Lash, 2000:60).

For Lash, the most important implication of this shift from risk society to risk culture is that it forces us to reconsider the nature of contemporary reflexivity. In risk society, the social structural conditioning of human action is increasingly mediated by social scientific knowledge, which serves to liberate agency from its moorings in traditional structural arrangements. Although this "structural reflexivity" occurs through the mediation of conceptual symbols, Lash points out that the expansion of information and communication structures has created another semiotic economy—"one of not conceptual but *mimetic* symbols" (1994:135, emphasis mine). Cultural changes involving the steady extension of electronic media into every aspect of personal life, with late modern individuals devoting increasing amounts of time and attention to television, movies, radio, Internet and "smart phone" communication, have created a new mode of reflexivity based on mimetic symbols such as images, sounds, and narratives. The expanding influence of mimetic symbols has created a space for a type of reflexivity that Lash terms as "aesthetic reflexivity," which he wishes to contrast with the "cognitive reflexivity" conceptualized by Beck and Giddens. "If reflexivity is self-monitoring, then 'aesthetic reflexivity' would be a sort of *hermeneutic* self-monitoring. ... Aesthetic and hermeneutic reflexivity is rooted not in self-monitoring but in self-*interpretation*" (Lash, 1993:8).

Lash's treatment of risk culture and aesthetic reflexivity is complex and draws extensively on a wide range of philosophical and theoretical traditions, so I will not attempt a thorough review of his argument here. However, it would be helpful for the discussion that follows to consider some of Lash's salient points about risk culture and aesthetic reflexivity. In seeking to correct the cognitive bias in Beck and Giddens' conception of reflexivity, Lash directs attention to the contrast between early modern and late modern subjectivity. As noted above, the early modern imperative to order natural contingency by the individual or collective subject is achieved through the subsumption of the *particular* object by the *universal* subject, as exemplified by the cognitive reflexivity of Kantian cognitive and practical judgement. In contrast, the expanding influence of mimetic symbols in late modernity gives rise to subjective judgements that depend more on hermeneutic *interpretation* by the subject, which means that the object can be only partially subsumed by the subject. Since aesthetic judgement is rooted in imagination and intuition, it involves a particularized component of subjectivity. Consequently, in aesthetic reflexivity, the relationship between subject and object involves the subsumption of a particular by a particular (Lash, 1993:9).

Thus, the concept of aesthetic reflexivity denotes a radical form of subjectivity, in which subjectivity escapes the universal of the cognitive categories and must find its own rules (Lash, 2000:52). This is an open and bodily subjectivity where judgements “follow not a visual logic but a logic much more tactile, sensuous, materialist and immediate; they follow what might be called a ‘logic of sensation’”(Lash, 2000:57). Aesthetic-reflexive judgements connect everyday experience to supra-logical meanings attached to existential experiences such as “the temporality of death, love, sexuality, relations with one’s children, friendship” (Lash, 2000:53). In contrast to the cognitive and scientific orientation of the risk society model, the risk culture perspective views social life as dominated by the concrete particulars of artifacts, rituals, and events that are affectively charged.

Lash’s extensive writings on risk culture and aesthetic reflexivity provide a crucial link between the risk society tradition and Goffman’s theory of voluntary risk-taking, but the highly abstracted character of his discussion makes it difficult to directly connect his idea of aesthetic reflexivity to Goffman’s conceptual framework. However, this problem can be ameliorated by considering an empirical application of the concept of aesthetic reflexivity to a domain that bears some strong resemblances to action-oriented activities. Silvia Rief’s (2009) study of *Club Cultures* builds on Lash’s insights about late modern reflexivity by broadening the focus of aestheticization to include not only mimetic symbols but mimetic *practices* as well—in particular, mimetic practices in dance (2009:93). It makes intuitive sense to establish parallels between dance and risk-taking activities since they have many characteristics in common. Rief notes the similarities between dance clubs and many other leisure settings that, coincidentally, happen to show up in Goffman’s description of where action can be found: theme parks, shopping malls, certain kinds of holidaying, urban spectacles, sport events, music festivals and concerts, casinos or gambling halls—places that “emphasize the quest for excitement ... through absorbing sensual stimulation and the collective nature of the event, which encourages expressivity and spontaneity” (2009:81). Thus, it is possible that dance (in club environments) may be a useful metaphor for “action” in the sense of highlighting the mimetic qualities of this form of risk taking behavior.

By combining mimetic symbols and mimetic practices in her conception of aesthetic reflexivity, Rief is also able to focus attention on two critically important concerns of Goffman’s general dramaturgical orientation. The first is the ontological priority that is given to the interactional domain and the importance of co-presence in Goffman’s dramaturgical approach. Rief states explicitly that her notion of aesthetic reflexivity “draws attention to the role of implicit, embodied forms of understanding as well as to mimetic practices, imagination and intuition that are essential to social interaction. In this sense, *aesthetic reflexivity can be seen as a key element of (face-to-face) interaction* and not only as an upshot of (post-) modernism or post-industrialism” (2009:97, emphasis mine). She also notes that since club dancing takes place in a context of co-presence, communication depends as much on collective dance and movement as it does on verbal exchange—an interesting expression of Goffman’s famous distinction between signs “given” versus signs “given off.” The coordination of practices within this domain of interaction is rooted in “intuitive, embodied understanding, kinesthetic awareness and empathy” (2009:93).

A second way that Rief’s conception of aesthetic reflexivity converges with the dramaturgical approach is in the central significance assigned to the process of self-presentation in this reflexive practice. As we have seen, the concept of reflexivity has many meanings (see Lynch, 2000) and reflexive processes can operate at different levels (e.g., systemic versus individual reflexivity) but, for Rief, the key relevance of club dancing as a form of aesthetic reflexivity is its role in generating self-identity. Dance clubs are “sites for cultural body and emotion work (Shilling, 2005) that forms a central



part of identity at least in certain segments of the population. Such emotion work involves the control of one's body appearance and presentation through impression management, the display or alteration of feelings ..." (2009:82), and a self-presentation that complies with aesthetic style codes (2009:93). A particularly strong link to dramaturgy can be seen in Rief's discussion of one of the two modes of "aestheticization" involved in transcending everyday realities within club and dance cultures. "Stylization" (in contrast to "sensation" involved in directly intervening in the nervous system through drug use or other prosthetic technologies) is a performative, mimetic practice in which individuals engage in a form of acting "as-if" by engaging in certain idealized ways of comporting the body and performing social roles (2009:102). This is, of course, reminiscent of Goffman's early work on the "presentation of self," which also emphasized the idealized nature of the self displayed in performances before audiences (Goffman, 1959). Thus, in the context of club dancing, stylization can be understood as a special form of acting:

From a mundane perspective, stylization embraces practices of decorating or masquerading the body through fashion, dress, outfit, make-up, hairstyle, costumes and more. This also extends to body action, the 'decoration' of the body with gestures, postures, and movement as in dance, which has been described as the creation of imaginary, 'as-if' spheres ... (2009:102).

Rief's study of club cultures clearly reveals the important overlaps between the mimetic qualities of club dancing and processes of self-presentation captured by Goffman's dramaturgical perspective and therefore her work serves as an important bridge between Lash's abstract analysis of aesthetic reflexivity and the concept of action. Since Goffman's theory of action is based on background assumptions that derive from the dramaturgical model of the self, it may be useful to conceptualize "action" as mimetic practice that generates a form of aesthetic reflexivity. In the remaining section of this paper, I explore this possibility and show how the theory of action helps broaden our understanding of the problem of social reproduction in risk society and culture.

### **Ontological Insecurity, Aesthetic Reflexivity, and Action**

So we return to the late modern social universe of risk society and culture. As discussed earlier, the unique accomplishment of Beck and Giddens' social-historical perspective is that it allows us to see the contemporary global social system, dominated by humanly-produced dangers of unprecedented scope and ever expanding uncertainties in daily life, as a radicalized form of modernity as opposed to a *post*-modernity. This is an important insight because it allows us to more effectively grasp the key imperative of our social universe—the problem of dealing with natural contingency in human affairs, which has existed since the inception of the modernist project several centuries ago. If it can be understood that this fundamental imperative has not changed since the dawn of the modern age, then it is possible to identify the most important distinguishing features of the contemporary social world by describing and analyzing the social structures and resources for controlling natural contingency. My goal at this point is to show how Goffman's theory of action contributes to this latter task.

I will begin by first identifying the particular version of the reflexive modernization thesis that is most amenable to the present effort. As noted above, the common practice of referencing both Beck and Giddens in discussions of reflexive modernization and risk society tends to obscure important differences between these two theorists of late modernity. Although they embrace a common vision of emergent social change, Beck and Giddens belong to different paradigmatic sociological traditions. As Lash (1993:6-7) points out, Beck belongs to the German "continuist" tradition (represented by Habermas and Luhmann) that "understands social change as a learning process," while Giddens is tied to a "discontinuist" orientation closely aligned with the paradigmatic concerns of

classical sociological theory. While Beck's continuist orientation emphasizes change and improvement, Giddens' discontinuist agenda addresses the classical theoretical question of "How is society possible?" Since Goffman's theory of action is also primarily concerned with the classical problem of order and social reproduction, I have chosen to focus on Giddens' version of reflexive modernization in explaining the role of action in risk society and culture.

As an alternative to the dominating themes of institutional differentiation and integration in mainstream sociological theory, Giddens' approach to the development of modern societies focuses on the way in which institutions become situated in time and space. In particular, it is the emergence of *time-space distanciation* or the organization of time and space "so as to connect presence and absence" that most distinguishes modern social relations from the earlier pre-modern era (Giddens, 1990:14). The ultimate consequence of time-space distanciation is that the "embedded" social world of the pre-modern era, characterized by the co-presence of social actors, gives way to societies dominated by "disembedded" institutions, in which social relations have been "lifted out" of the local contexts of interaction and restructured across indefinite spans of time and space (Giddens, 1990:21).

In addition to the effects of time-space distanciation and the disembedding of social institutions, modern societies acquire a dynamic character that can also be traced to the "*reflexive ordering and reordering* of social relations" deriving from the penetration of social scientific ideas about social life into the broader culture of commonsense social actors—the "double hermeneutic" process mentioned earlier. This involves the social scientific cooptation and reformulation of lay agents' ideas about social life and the reintroduction of this social scientific meta-language back into the lay culture through media- and education-base socialization. Thus, "[s]ociological knowledge spirals in and out of the universe of social life, reconstructing both itself and that universe as an integral part of that process" (Giddens, 1990:16, emphasis in original). As a consequence of all three of these processes, the pace of change increases in the modern world, with individuals experiencing expanding opportunities for escaping the constraints of local habits and practices and modern organizations finding new ways to connect local and global networks (Giddens, 1990:20). According to Giddens, these processes are the driving forces behind the extreme dynamism of modernity.

By taking account of these "great dynamic forces of modernity," Giddens is able to distinguish the "radicalized" phase of modernity that is discontinuous with the early phase of the modernist project (Giddens, 1990:52). However, the radical expression of modernist principles that now frame the everyday experience of contemporary social actors leaves most individuals in a highly unsettled state, which Giddens refers to metaphorically as something like being aboard a "careering juggernaut" rather than a well-driven automobile (Giddens, 1990:53). Riding the juggernaut of modernity has many consequences for the moral and emotional lives of modern individuals, but one of the most important of these moral/emotional concerns involves the emergence of a distinctly modern preoccupation with the problem of "ontological security" (Giddens, 1990:92). Drawing heavily on the object-relations school of psychoanalytic thought, Giddens conceptualizes ontological security as the basic sense of confidence that individuals have in the constancy of the material and social world and the continuous nature of the self. It refers to the fundamental sense of reliability we have in persons and things, which is "an emotional, rather than a cognitive, phenomenon, and it is rooted in the unconscious" (Giddens, 1990:92).

Thus, in Giddens' version of reflexive modernization, the key problem of explaining order has been reformulated in terms of ontological security—or rather ontological *insecurity*. “The problem is precisely how we can cope with ... psychic and social hazards, and maintain reasonable levels of order and stability in our personalities and society” (Lash, 1994:117). In addressing this problem, Giddens returns again to his roots in the phenomenological tradition, which is clearly revealed in the contrast he draws between the pre-modern and modern social contexts. To explain how traditional societies maintain social conventions in the face of ontological insecurity, he relies on an ethnomethodological conception of ongoing “reality work” undertaken as a form of hermeneutically mediated reflexivity. In traditional social environments dominated by face-to-face interactions, the constancy of the material and social reality is a practical accomplishment achieved through everyday talk and interaction. This reflexive process sustains “an extremely sophisticated methodology of practical consciousness, which is a continuing protective device ... against the anxieties which even the most casual encounter with others can potentially provoke” (Giddens, 1990:99). In the modern era, by contrast, reality work is mediated more by institutions than face-to-face interaction and the double hermeneutic becomes the primary means of managing ontological insecurity. In this context, hermeneutically mediated reflexivity occurs through “expert systems,” with the psychological sciences providing therapeutic resources that protect individual identity against ontological insecurity and lay versions of the sociological perspective maintaining trust in the social reproduction of social relations in the face of contingency (Giddens, 1990:38-44).

Giddens' version of reflexive modernization offers a powerful perspective on late modern society that has strong purchase on the social world we inhabit today. However, like any theory of comparable scope, Giddens' framework is plagued by certain omissions and contradictions. I believe that Lash (194:199) is correct in stating that Giddens' (and Beck's) “analyses remain not so much flawed as partial because of a *scientific* character to their assumptions.” Giddens' decision to frame the issues relating to ontological insecurity in phenomenological/ ethnomethodological terms means that he can only focus on *cognitive* forms of reflexivity in his analysis of the mediation of contingency, even though he states himself that ontological security is “an emotional, rather than a cognitive, phenomenon” (Giddens, 1990:92). So this raises some important questions: Is the hermeneutically mediated reflexivity that Giddens emphasizes sufficient for maintaining the constancy and continuity of material, social, and personal realities in the face of ontological insecurity? If there is an emotional component to ontological security, what kind of emotional resources are required to ensure that the contingencies of self and social life are controlled and where can they be found? And if such emotional resources are crucial for the ongoing (re)production of identities and social relations, how can these resources be conceptualized in terms of reflexivity?

To answer these questions, I now return to *Where the Action Is*. Having previously reviewed most of the ideas that form the conceptual scaffolding of Goffman's theory of action—the nature of risk, consequentiality, fatefulness, and the concept of action—I will now get to the crux of his argument. Recall that the primary goal of the analysis is to explain why individuals actively seek opportunities for risk taking when there is no obvious gain for doing so. By claiming that action activities are “undertaken for what is felt to be their own sake,” Goffman seems to suggest that action offers intrinsic rewards that explain people's attraction to the dangers of these undertakings. Deep into the analysis, however, he reveals that he has chosen his words carefully in defining this aspect of action, in order to avoid the implied meaning of this phrase. Action is undertaken for *what is felt* to be its own sake—that is, action-seekers may *feel* a deep attraction to the action experience, but this feeling hides the true significance of action.

To explain what is *really* behind the pursuit of action, Goffman turns to the concept of “character.” In Goffman’s usage, the term “character” refers to a range of personal qualities displayed in fateful endeavors, which are crucial to maintaining one’s involvement in the enterprise in the face of a strong desire to abandon the effort. To get at the essential nature of character, Goffman distinguishes between the “primary properties” or activity-specific skills one must possess in pursuing a particular form of action (“timing” in bullfighting, a good “aim” in game hunting, knowledge of the odds in gambling, etc.) and general qualities of character that apply to all forms of action (1967:217). The most obvious expression of character in fateful events is the demonstration of courage—the capacity to proceed with a dangerous course of action even when one is fully aware of the dangers one confronts. But courage is most often expressed in forms that are specific to the action undertaken, as when gamblers gracefully submit to the rules of a game even when they have much to lose (the quality of “gamble”) or when boxers demonstrate “gameness” or “heart” by continuing to give their all to the fight in the face of almost certain defeat. The special power of Goffman’s treatment of character, however, is his ability to identify the more subtle personal traits exhibited in fateful situations that can influence the course of events. He employs terms like “integrity,” “gallantry,” and “composure” to capture these qualities and he shows how each of these traits is expressed in particular forms of action.

Among the collection of character traits that Goffman identifies, the one that receives the most attention is composure, which is further dissected into the sub-capacities of poise, emotional self-control, calmness, presence of mind, dignity, and stage confidence. What is most noteworthy about the elements of composure, as compared to the other character traits Goffman identifies, is that they all refer to somatic-affective qualities or embodied capacities. In describing the general nature of composure, Goffman emphasizes the control of one’s body in “physical tasks (typically involving small muscle control) in a concerted, smooth, self-controlled fashion under fateful circumstances” (1967:222-23). Similarly, he describes emotional self-control as exercising “physical control [over] the organs employed in discourse and gesture” (1967:223). “Dignity” is explicitly defined in corporeal terms as “sustain[ing] one’s bodily decorum in the face of costs, difficulties, and imperative urges” (1967:225). Presence of mind is also considered as an embodied skill, since it depends on the control of neurophysiological processes involved in mental “blocking.” Mental calmness is an element of stage confidence, which is “the capacity to withstand the dangers and opportunities of appearing before large audiences without becoming abashed, embarrassed, self-conscious, or panicky” (1967:226). Thus, all forms of composure are acquired through “the practiced easy use of human faculties—mind, limbs, and, especially, small muscles” (1967:228).

Although one might suppose that properties of composure are simply the kinds of innate embodied capacities that any courageous person possesses, this assumption would violate the logic of Goffman’s analysis. The key to understanding the role of composure and the other character traits in action activities is to appreciate the paradoxical nature of character. Goffman challenges common-sense “folk-beliefs” about the innate quality of character by proposing that it is not “given” in the individual but instead is “gambled.” “[A] single good showing can be taken as representative and a bad showing cannot be easily excused or re-attempted. To display or express character, weak or strong, is to generate character. The self, in brief, can be voluntarily subjected to re-creation” (1967:237).

Thus, the paradox of character is found in the fact that it is both unchanging and changeable:

And now we begin to see character for what it is. On the one hand, it refers to what is essential and unchanging about the individual—what is *characteristic* of him. On the other, it refers to attributes that can be generated and destroyed during fateful moments. In this latter view the individual can act so as to determine the traits that will thereafter be his; he can act so as to create and establish what is to be imputed to him. Every time a moment occurs, its participants will therefore find themselves with another little chance to make something of themselves (1967:238).

This paragraph is a crucial one in Goffman's essay because his assertions about character and action here are clearly informed by his broader theorization of the self as an emergent product of the interaction between actor and audience. In keeping with his dramaturgical approach, Goffman orients us to "behavior materials [such as] the glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation, whether intended or not" (1967:1). Thus, the self and its specific attributes are created through a semiotic process that involves two parts: "a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part with regard to which he *seems* to have little control, being chiefly derived from expression he gives off. The [audience] may then use *what are considered to be* ungovernable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects" (Goffman, 1959:7, emphasis added). In other words, an individual who 'signs' a self and its attributes to co-present others employs two basic semiotic resources—verbal/linguistic expressions and somatic/affective indicators. The audience treats signs of the latter variety as definitive because they are *assumed* to be impervious to manipulation by the individual. Of course, Goffman rejects this common-sense belief and his theory of the self rests on the claimed malleability of the body as a signing medium.

We see, then, why composure receives so much attention in Goffman's discussion of character. As the most embodied dimension of character, composure is viewed by common-sense actors as the most reliable signifier of innately-based character. And yet, all the elements of composure—poise, emotional self-control, calmness, presence of mind, dignity, and stage confidence—are seen by Goffman as no less governable by individuals engaged in character displays than the linguistic resources they may devote to this task. The terms Goffman uses to describe how character is revealed in action highlight the pliability of the semiotic resources employed for this purpose. Character is *displayed, shown, expressed, generated, created, and re-created*. As these terms suggest, the principal role of the body in volitional risk taking is to serve as a signing medium, one that is essentially hyperconductive in nature (Shalin, 2007:217).

The primary importance of character is its significance for explaining why people engage in dangerous action. In making the connection between action and character, Goffman can explain the motives for risk taking in distinctively sociological terms. Challenging the common-sense view of voluntary risk taking as motivated by individual-level factors, Goffman suggests that action offers an opportunity for the reflexive formation of character. The pursuit of action is when individuals can present self-qualities that indicate "what they are made of." In Goffman's (1967:237) words, "[i]t is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down." Thus, the acquisition and maintenance of character is a reward of sufficient value to inspire the taking of serious risks in dangerous action. "We can begin to see that action need not be perceived, in the first instance, as an expression of impulsiveness or irrationality, even where risk without apparent prize results. Loss, to be sure, is chanced through action; but a real gain of character can occur" (1967:238).

What we find in Goffman's theory of action then is a creative elaboration of his dramaturgical approach to individual-level reflexivity. As I stated earlier, Goffman's conception of individual reflexivity is rooted in an interactional framework (in contrast to the phenomenological approach adopted by Giddens), which is revealed here in the attention that he devotes to "strong character" as an *imputed* characteristic. Like his more general notion of the self, the elements of character he identifies do not reside *within* the individual; rather, they emerge out of the interaction of actor and audience. Thus, in Goffman's conception of individual reflexivity, the mediating factor is the response of an audience to the behavioral displays of an action-seeker, which then become integrated into the self-concept of the action-seeking individual. The process of observers imputing strong character to action-seekers is fully reflexive in the sense that the imputation has practical consequences for action seekers—as an audience-produced indexical expression of the traits exhibited by action-seekers, *strong character* "changes the very practical circumstances for which it now stands as a description" (Mehan and Wood, 1975:141). In other words, the character of the action-seeking subject is *objectified* through the responses of others to his or her behavioral displays.

For the broader purposes of this analysis, the key thing to note about Goffman's approach to action and character is that it refers to a form of reflexivity that involves behavior, embodiment, and emotion. As we have seen, being designated as a person of strong character is not dependent upon anything that action-seekers *say* about themselves; rather, it depends on how one actually acts in fateful situations, on the comportment of one's body, on the management of one's emotions in these situations. Like the club dancing activities studied by Rief, the pursuit of action is about movement, sensual involvement with people or things, emotional stimulation and control, deep connections to body equipment or gear, affectively-charged rituals and events, and the use of one's intuition and imagination. In action, as in dance, the mediation of the self occurs not through linguistic symbols but through mimetic practices. Thus, the reflexive process that Goffman describes in his theory of action is best classified as a form of aesthetic reflexivity: the displays of movement, body comportment, and emotion by action-seekers represent a form of *mimesis*, in which the moral/ethical constitution of these individuals (as persons of "strong character") are "mirrored" in the responses of the audience.

The focus on (re)creation of the self in character displays is more typical of Goffman's approach as it is known to most sociologists, although the connection established here between Goffman's notion of reflexivity and mimetic/aesthetic practices is something new. What is generally overlooked in Goffman's study of action, however, is his shift from the more familiar focus on *individual* reflexivity to an analysis of *systemic* reflexivity. In fact, the connection he establishes between individual and systemic reflexivity is the lynchpin of his entire theory of volitional risk taking. After discussing the reflexive generation of character in the interactions of action-seekers and their audiences, he moves to another level of analysis to explain the broader social value of character (and the action activities in which it is displayed):

Social organization everywhere has the problem of morale and continuity. Individuals must come to all their little situations with some enthusiasm and concern, for it is largely through such moments that social life occurs, and if a fresh effort were not put into each of them, society would surely suffer. ... [I]f society is to persist, the same pattern must be sustained from one actual social occasion to the next. Here the need is for rules and conventionality. ... Possibilities regarding character encourage us to renew our efforts at every moment of society's activity we approach, especially its social ones; and it is precisely through these renewals that the old routines can be sustained. We are allowed to think there is something to be won in the moments we face so that society can face moments and defeat them (1967:238-239).

Thus, action offers an opportunity to reward strong character, but what is most important about these personal traits is that they ensure people's willingness to "renew [their] efforts at every moment of society's activity." In short, action-seekers model the qualities that all societal members must exhibit to some degree if the existing social order is to persist. Goffman's keen sense of irony in social life is displayed in his observations about where these action-seeking "figures-for-identification" are typically found in the social order:

And so, on the edges of society, are puddles of people who apparently find it reasonable to engage directly in the chancy deeds of an honorable life. In removing themselves further and further from the substance of our society, they seem to grasp more and more of certain aspects of its spirit. Their alienation from our reality frees them to be subtly induced into realizing our moral fantasies (1967:267).

We see now that Goffman's theoretical agenda in his study of action is much broader and sophisticated than most interpreters of his work realize. While it is true that the theory of action represents an especially creative application of the dramaturgical perspective and exploration of the reflexive self, it is also clear that Goffman's concerns extend beyond issues relating to actor-audience interaction to the one of central paradigmatic problems addressed by social theorists since the inception of our discipline (and before). This is the problem of explaining "how societies persist" in the face of the natural contingencies and ontological insecurities of lived experience in the modern world. In Goffman's own terms, it is the problem of explaining how social actors can be motivated to approach their "little situations" with enthusiasm and concern; to put "fresh effort" into sustaining "old routines." What is most remarkable about Goffman's theory of action is his novel response to this problem and the continuing relevance of his ideas to the late modern social world we inhabit today. I will conclude with some brief observations on this last point.

## Conclusions

Following Beck, Giddens, and Lash, it can be asserted that the central imperative of risk society and culture is the problem of controlling contingency, which unifies all of the historical configurations of “modern” life. I have reviewed the various ways that these theorists treat the problem of natural contingency, with a particular focus on Giddens’ account of reflexive modernization and Lash’s response to this account. As we have seen, Giddens frames the problem of contingency in terms of the late modern condition of ontological insecurity and focuses on how individuals continue to do their part in reproducing the social order in the face of such insecurity. In addressing this problem, he emphasizes hermeneutically mediated reflexivity, in the form of the ethnomethods of practical consciousness in the pre-modern context and the knowledge technologies of expert systems in the late modern context. Thus, as Lash points out, Giddens sees the problem of contingency being solved through the mediation of cognitive symbols, which means that reflexive modernization is achieved primarily through cognitive reflexivity.

While I agree with the general thrust of Giddens’ analysis, I have tried to show that an engagement with Goffman’s theory of action sensitizes us to a missing dimension in Giddens’ approach. Giddens demonstrates the necessity of “reality work” to ensure the reproduction of the social order and he explains how such reality work is performed in late modernity, but he fails to fully address the need for “emotion work” in social reproduction. Clearly, the persistence of social life depends upon the ongoing generation of motivational and emotional resources that inspire social actors to put “fresh effort” into sustaining the many social situations they must navigate in daily life. In a social environment characterized by the steady decline of normative constraints and increasing dominance of risk agency and consciousness, this kind of emotion work has become more important than ever before.

Where Giddens’ theory of reflexive modernization connects with Goffman’s theory of action, then, is in their different but complementary conceptions of reflexivity: for Giddens, reflexivity is a hermeneutic/cognitive form, in which hermeneutically mediated reflexivity is achieved via *talk* or the internalization by laypersons of *expert knowledge*; for Goffman, reflexivity is a mimetic/aesthetic form, which involves *self-performance* via mimetic actions and corporeal signs. To establish an even stronger complementarity between Giddens’ and Goffman’s approaches to reflexivity, it is also useful to consider Goffman’s treatment of “vicarious experience,” which is taken up at the end of his essay. Anticipating the expanding importance of cultural structures in late modernity, especially the products controlled by the culture industry, Goffman briefly discusses mass media depictions of “serious” action: In film, television, books, magazines, etc. “opportunity is provided us to identify with real or fictive persons engaging in fatefulness of various kinds, to participate vicariously in these situations” (1967:262). In the late modern social world, “action-figures” manufactured by mass media are perhaps our most readily available sources of identification with individuals of strong character. Thus, if expert systems provide important cognitive resources for managing ontological insecurity in late modernity, media images and narratives may function as powerful motivational and emotional resources for dealing with this problem.

Whether real or mediatized—a distinction that is becoming increasingly tenuous in late modernity—action seekers can be understood here as contributing to an aesthetic form of reflexivity that, along with cognitive reflexivity, ensures the continued reproduction of social reality. In an age of unprecedented global risks and expanding uncertainties in social relations, we confront one of the great ironies of late modern existence: as life becomes more risky and uncertain for increasing numbers of people, individuals who take *unnecessary* risks become primary sources of moral inspiration for us all.



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