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THE GOFFMAN LEGACY:
DECONSTRUCTING/RECONSTRUCTING SOCIAL SCIENCE

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Abstract

Goffman's legacy has been the subject of many, often conflicting, interpretations. I propose that he bestowed four gifts. 1. Goffman was an incredibly perceptive observer of the microworld of social interaction. He furnished us with a vocabulary for uncovering this world. 2. Most of Goffman's descriptions of interaction represented emotions as well as thought and action. In this respect they were three dimensional, arousing the reader's emotions and sympathy. 3. His primary substantive focus was the Western conception of the self as an isolated, self-contained individual. He repeatedly offered an alternative conception: the self as an aspect of social and cultural arrangements. 4. Finally, and most broadly, all of his work deconstructed the assumptive reality current in our society. It was mainly this last direction which made his work controversial, but also gives it revolutionary potential. I propose that Goffman wrote in the tradition of Whitehead, Koestler, Schutz, and Mannheim, in order to create a new social science culture.

Erving Goffman is probably the most widely read sociologist in the history of the discipline. Perhaps almost as widely cited, his work has received substantial notice. But the meaning of his work and therefore his legacy is by no means clear. In the 18 years since his tragically youthful death at 59, six valuable monographs and edited volumes interpreting his work have been published.¹ Many further mentions, some of them chapter length, can be found in other volumes. But even a quick reading suggests that there is no consensus. As a reviewer of the latest (Smith 1999) volume suggests (Toiskallio 2000), the contributors find in Goffman's writings "simultaneous irritation and fascination."

One can go further if one compares the offerings in these books. There is agreement between the authors about Goffman's felicitous style and stimulation. But there are also grave doubts about the nature of his legacy. Within each authors' perspective, especially the most appreciative, there is also ambivalence. Although they find much to praise, there are also many irritations, and even some confusion about what Goffman had to say to them.

Goffman's critics are not ambivalent. Even though they find positive features, critics like Gouldner (1970), Psathas (1980), and Schegloff (1988) are dismissive. Gouldner was repelled by Goffman's miniature scale, and by what Gouldner thought was his disinterest in power and hierarchy. Psathas and Schegloff, like many of the commentators, critics and admirers alike, found Goffman unsystematic to the point of chaos. Goffman's approach to the three main elements in social science, theory, method, and data, is, to say the least, not clear. Since this theme is common to virtually all of the comment, I provide an example.

Two of the most detailed and appreciative commentators are Lofland (1980), reviewing the work up to and including *Stigma* (1963), and Manning (1980), the whole oeuvre, with special attention to a later work, *Frame Analysis* (1974). The overall tone of both Lofland and Manning is appreciative. Yet their systematic reviews unearth features that give them pause. One that is

¹ Ditton (1980); Drew and Wooton (1988), Riggins (1990), Manning (1992), Burns (1992) and Smith (1999).

also noted by most of the essayists is that Goffman started afresh in each book, not only not relating his new ideas to his old ones, but not even taking any note of the old ones. This practice gives rise to some confusion as to Goffman's intent.

In his essay, Lofland (1980, 29) noted that the first three pages of one article of Goffman's (1955) contains:

“3 types of face
4 consequences of being out of or in the wrong face
2 basic kinds of face work
5 kinds of avoidance processes
3 phases of the corrective process
5 ways an offering can be accepted (1955, pp. 211-213).”

Manning (1980, 270), notes that later, in *Frame Analysis* (1974,) the following concepts “(at least), are found in a 19 page span:

4 kinds of playful deceit
6 types of benign fabrications
3 kinds of exploitative fabrications
5 sorts of self-deception (1974, pp 87-116)”

Could Lofland and Manning be implying that so many partridges and peartrees suggest a Christmas carol as much as a sociological theory?

Manning (1980, 270) goes on to complain explicitly:

Such lists of items do not always fall out so neatly in a text, they may accrue in an almost shadowy fashion. The purpose of these lists is unstated and often elusive. He does not infer or deduce from them, does not claim that these types are exhaustive, explicate the degree of kinds of possible logical interconnections between them, nor does he always relate his current efforts to previous ideas of himself or others.

It is clear from such observations that Goffman's work does not make much, if any, contribution to theory, method or empirical evidence as these categories have come to be understood in social science.

It is conceivable, however, that we might be dealing with something more primitive, preliminary to theory, method and evidence. Reading Goffman, as Lemert (1997, p,viii), put it, “made something happen... a shudder of recognition.”

Lemert goes on to describe this quality of Goffman's work:

The experience Goffman effects is that of colonizing a new social place into which the reader enters from which to exit never quite the same. To have once, even if only once, seen the social world from within such a place is never after to see it otherwise, ever after to read the world anew. In thus seeing differently, we are other than we were...(p. xiii)

This is a strong claim: our vision of the world, and even of ourselves, is transformed by reading. But it is a claim with which I agree. My question is, how did Goffman do it? I propose that his work had four qualities that arouse readers out of their slumbers: he provided a vocabulary for

describing the microworld, his portrayals of human beings usually included emotions, as well as thoughts and actions, he deconstructed the conception of the self as an isolated individual, and finally, his method of investigation was to undercut the assumptive reality of our society.

1. A Vocabulary for the Microworld.

The first gift, widely agreed upon by commentators, is that Goffman was an incredibly perceptive observer of the microworld of social interaction. He saw and called to our attention a world that surrounds us, but one that we usually do not notice. A recent cartoon in the *New Yorker* slyly refers to this situation. A male client, lying on the couch, is saying to the analyst: "Look, call it denial if you like, but I think what goes on in my personal life is none of my own damn business!" Like much of the best humor, this caption contains a core of truth. In daily life, and in most social science, the details of the microworld of interaction are unmarked, and usually disregarded.

Goffman, however, noticed the riches of activity in the microworld, and invented a great panoply of terms and phrases to describe them. Certainly the idea of impression management is one such invention. Also frequently quoted are: situational improprieties, face-work, the interaction order, cooling the mark, frames (in the special sense in which Goffman used the term), role distance, alienation from interaction, total institutions, footing, and many others. These terms have come to be irreplaceable for those who want to understand everyday life. Since there is almost unanimous consensus on this point among his commentators, I will not elaborate on it further.

2. Emotions in the Microworld

There is a second feature of Goffman's work that is less obvious: unlike most social scientists, he often included emotions as well as thoughts and action in descriptions of his actors. However, this feature is more difficult to establish than the first one. An immediate sticking point is that most of Goffman's explicit treatment of emotions concerns only one emotion, embarrassment. This emotion plays an important part in most of his studies, especially the earlier ones, both explicitly, and in much larger scope, by implication. But why only one emotion? What about other primary emotions, such as love, fear, anger, grief, and so on? To the average reader, the exclusive focus on embarrassment might seem arbitrary.

Explicitly, Goffman gave only one justification. He argued that embarrassment had universal, pancultural importance in social interaction:

Face-to-face interaction in any culture seems to require just those capacities that flustering seems to destroy. Therefore, events which lead to embarrassment and the methods for avoiding and dispelling it may provide a cross-cultural framework of sociological analysis (1956 266).

Heath (1988 137) further justifies Goffman's focus:

Embarrassment lies at the heart of the social organization of day-to-day conduct. It provides a personal constraint on the behavior of the individual in society and a public response to actions and activities considered problematic or untoward. Embarrassment and its potential play an important part in sustaining the individual's commitment to social organization, values and convention. It permeates everyday life and our dealings with others. It informs ordinary conduct and bounds the individual's behavior in areas of social life that formal and institutionalized constraints do not reach.

Beyond these considerations, there is another, broader one that is implied in Goffman's ideas, particularly the idea of impression management. Most of his work implies that every actor is extraordinarily sensitive to the exact amount of deference being received by others. Even a slight difference between what is expected and what is received, whether the difference be too little or too much, can cause embarrassment and other painful emotions.

In an earlier article (Scheff 2000), I followed Goffman's lead by proposing that embarrassment and shame are primarily social emotions, because they usually arise from a threat to the bond, no matter how slight. In my view, the degree of social connectedness, of accurately taking the viewpoint of the other without judging it, is the key component of social bonds. A discrepancy in the amount of deference conveys judgement, and so is experienced as a threat to the bond. Since even a slight discrepancy in deference is sensed, embarrassment or the anticipation of embarrassment would be a virtually continuous presence in interaction.

In most of his writing, Goffman's Everyperson was constantly aware of her own standing in the eyes of others, implying almost continuous states of self-conscious emotions: embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and in rare instances, pride, or anticipation of these states. Their sensitivity to the eyes of others make Goffman's actors seem three dimensional, since they embody not only thought and behavior, but also feeling ("hand, mind, and heart," in Phillip's [2000] phrase).

This is probably one of the aspects of Goffman's writings that makes them fascinating to readers, as suggested by Lofland's (1980, 47) appreciative comment:

I suspect I am not alone in knowing people who have been deeply moved upon reading Stigma (1963) and other of his works. These people recognized themselves and others and saw that Goffman was articulating some of the most fundamental and painful of human social experiences. He showed them suddenly that they were not alone, that someone else understood what they know and felt. He knew and expressed it beautifully, producing in them joy over pain understood and appreciated, an inextricable mixture of happiness and sadness, expressed in tears.

Although Lofland doesn't name specific emotions, his reference to "the most fundamental and painful of human social experiences" seem to imply the emotions of embarrassment, shame, and humiliation. Goffman's inclusion of embarrassment as a key component of his writing could lead to the type of empathic identification described by Lofland, since most social science writing is unemotional.

3. Deconstructing the Self

Goffman's primary substantive target was the social institution of the self-contained individual. This institution was also repeatedly challenged by Elias throughout his writings, but especially in his essay (1998) on "homo clausus" (the myth of the closed, self-contained individual). Sociological social psychology, in so far as it is derived from the work of G.H. Mead (1934), also challenges this conception. Blumer (1986) was particularly forceful in this regard.

Goffman's challenge to schemes that isolated individuals from the social matrix in which they were embedded was not limited to psychiatry and medicine, it pervades virtually all of his writing. Although Goffman allowed some freedom to the individual through role-distance, his basic theme was that the self was more or less an image cast by social arrangements:

The self...is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented... (1959 252-3).

The self... can be seen as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members. The self in this sense is not a property of the persons to whom it is attributed, but dwells rather in the pattern of social control that is exerted in connection with the person by himself and those around him. This special kind of institutional arrangement does not so much support the self as constituted it. (1961, 168).

...the proper study of interaction is not the individual and his psychology, but rather the syntactical relations among acts of different persons mutually present to one another...not, then, men (sic) and their moments. Rather, moments and their men (1967, 2, 3).

Smith (1999) comes close to the view that Goffman's main target was Western individualism:

The pursuit of a sociological decimation of conventional Western liberal notions of the individual is an analytic impulse animating much of Goffman's sociology (10).

However, the implication that Goffman was challenging only liberal notions of the individual misses the mark. His attack ranges over the entire political, psychological and philosophical spectrum: radical, liberal, conservative, and reactionary. Although political conservatives may occasionally sound the note of community, they are easily as adamant as liberals in their insistence on rugged individualism. Goffman was an affirmative action critic; he didn't discriminate.

Deconstructing Social Reality

But there is another, broader dimension to Goffman's legacy, one at the most elemental level. I propose that the central thrust of Goffman's method was toward creating free-floating intelligence in social science. Although Goffman himself made no such claim, it seems to me that that his work sought to demonstrate, each time anew, the possibility of overthrowing cultural assumptions about the nature of reality.

I begin with a comment by one of the authors in the most recent (1999, 83) volume. Gronfein reminds us, early in his review of Goffman's many articles and chapters on mental illness, that Goffman clearly indicated that he was not a sociologist of any particularly substantive area. This is an important point with reference to mental illness not only because to the large number of his essays on this topic, but also because of the extraordinary vehemence of his attack. As Manning suggests:

...Goffman reserves his most cutting ironies and examples for the most legitimate of social institutions, medicine. Psychiatrists and psychiatry merit even more severe condemnation through incongruity. Goffman, in a series of [seven] papers... has ridiculed and indignantly criticized the assumptions and operation of conventional medicine and psychiatry (1980, p. 265).

Goffman referred to psychiatrists as "tinkers" and to psychiatry as "the tinkering trade" and in many other ways, heaped ridicule on the profession. Manning (1980, 267) goes on to note the effect:

Such harshness, when combined with the brilliant metaphoric work that accompanies it, has the intended effect of producing a sense of shocked disbelief in the reader. More significantly, it acts to corrode the authoritative hegemony of meanings wrapped around their conduct by members of powerful institutions.

This comment, in passing, proposes that Goffman's purpose was to attack powerful institutions. But first we must deal with a seeming inconsistency. Both Gronstein and Manning make the point that the institution of psychiatry and mental illness was one of Goffman's main targets. How can this point be reconciled with Goffman's assertions that he was not a sociologist of any particular area? I want to second the proposition, made by several commentators, that although mental illness was important for Goffman, it was nothing but the telling topic or case for him. I think that the idea that Goffman was not interested in any of the phenomena he studied for its own sake, but only as a topic for his particular mode of investigation, makes a first step into the Goffman enigma. But what was his mode of investigation?

Goffman's primary goal may have been the development of a reflexive social science. Most of the appreciative reviews of Goffman's work invoke the idea of reflexiveness, but only in passing. These commentators do little to explain what they mean by the term, nor its implications for current social science. Those who do explain what they mean by reflexiveness usually ignore or even dismiss Goffman. Alvin Gouldner provides an example. He proposed reflexivity, self-awareness, as a sine quo non of social science. He argued for the need

“to transform the sociologist, to penetrate deeply into his daily life and work, enriching them with new sensitivities, and so raise the sociologist's self-awareness to a new historical level Gouldner (1970).

In a later comment, Gouldner explained that current social science was deeply mired in everyday language and understanding:

The pursuit of hermeneutic understanding, however, cannot promise that men (sic) as we now find them, with their everyday language and understanding, will always be capable of further understanding and of liberating themselves. At decisive points the ordinary language and conventional understandings fail and must be transcended. It is essentially the task of the social sciences, more generally, to create new and “extraordinary” languages, to help men (sic) learn to speak them, and to mediate between the deficient understandings of ordinary language and the different and liberating perspectives of the extraordinary languages of social theory. . . . To say social theorists are concept-creators means that they are not merely in the knowledge-creating business, but also in the language-reform and language-creating business. In other words, they are from the beginning involved in creating a new culture (Gouldner 1972: 16: quoted in Phillips 1988).

Was Goffman attempting a reflexive sociology, one that would create a new culture for social science?

Unfortunately, Goffman never clearly explained the overall point of his studies. His descriptions of the meaning of his work were almost comically laconic. He and others have clearly made the point that he was trying to achieve “perspective by incongruity.” To find more substantial ground, one needs to look at some of his statements about actors in general. In one of his early (1961) statements, he said:

“...any accurately improper move can poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality.”

Although this passage is not self-referential, it could also be applied to Goffman’s own basic method, if we can understand what he meant by an “accurately improper move” and “the thin sleeve of immediate reality.” The meaning of an improper move is easy; one that violates the assumptions of one’s audience. The idea of improper moves that are accurate is harder to pin down.

To explain this idea, I draw upon the philosopher of science Whitehead, who stated:

A clash of doctrines is not a disaster --- it is an opportunity...In formal logic, a contradiction is the signal of a defeat; but in the evolution of real knowledge it marks the first step in progress toward a victory (Whitehead 1962 pp. 266-267).

Goffman’s method of investigation was to engineer a continuing clash between the taken-for-granted assumptions in our society and his incongruous metaphors and propositions. Most improper moves merely embarrass the actor and/or those near her. But by framing a viewpoint that exactly contradicts commonly held assumptions, Goffman was developing what Koestler (1967) called bisociation: seeing phenomena simultaneously from two contradictory viewpoints. Like Whitehead, Koestler thought that all creativity arose from the collision of contradictory viewpoints.

Devising a phrase or sentence that is “accurately improper” in this sense would seem to be a formidable task. One must first seek out an important commonly held assumption, then exactly counter it with an equally plausible assumption. It would depend, like writing poetry, on deep intuition rather than logical analysis.

Goffman’s idea of “alienation from interaction” similarly helps explain what he meant by an improper move. Once again, he did little to apply this idea to his own work. What he meant was that those actors who behave improperly, breaking the rules, not only become alienated from whatever transaction they are involved in, but also might catch an enlightening glimpse of the nature of that transaction, that is, a glimpse of another reality behind the conventional one. Manning (1980, 263), in passing, makes a similar point:

His [technique] is not simply a matter of convenience or artifice. It would appear to be a deliberate choice of weapons by which to assail the fictional facades that constitute the assumptive reality of conventional society.

Goffman seems to have been trying to free himself and his readers from the culturally induced reality in which he and they were entrapped, by making “accurately improper” moves.

Of course, pace postmodernity, one can never be completely free of cultural perspectives. There is no place to stand that does not require linguistic and cultural assumptions. Mannheim’s (1951) point about free-floating intellectuals was that they were not completely free, but free relative to the attitude of everyday life, which is completely entrapped, like the great majority of the members of any society. Being able to see any phenomena from more than one perspective is a great advantage for innovators of any kind, but it is also fairly rare.

Reflexive Social Science in Theory and in Practice

As already indicated, Gouldner (1970) issued a forceful call for a reflexive social science, one that would free social scientists from the trap of “everyday language and understanding.” But it didn’t occur to him that Goffman might be actually doing what Gouldner was calling for. Instead, Gouldner was repelled by what he thought of as Goffman’s lack of attention to power, and to his lack of a strong political stance. In a very detailed rebuttal, Rogers (1980, Ch. 4.) clears Goffman of the charge of ignoring power. She shows how Goffman did indeed analyze power, and went further than Gouldner, into the corollary spheres of influence and control.

Rogers goes on to characterize Gouldner’s critique of Goffman’s work as inappropriate and even careless (p. 128). In what may be another, but less direct rebuttal to Gouldner, she wrote that Goffman was interested in power, but not obsessed with it. This statement may have been Rogers’ delicate way of implying that whereas Goffman was not obsessed with power, Gouldner was.

Her comment may help understand Gouldner’s dismissal of Goffman, but a more general critique of the resistance of social scientists to his work. The reason that Goffman was not obsessed with power is that he seemed to treat power, hierarchy and authority as only one of two key dimensions of social organization. The other key dimension was what might be called social integration (alienation/solidarity--Scheff 1997, Ch. 4). Goffman’s analysis of power, influence and control was integral to his examination of the extent to which actors were alienated or solidary with each other.

Classical sociology was formulated around this latter dimension: the way in which urbanization and industrialization lead to increasing alienation. Marx was the first theorist who gave more emphasis to power than to alienation. In his early writing, both dimensions were represented: balancing his attention to economic and political power were his writings on alienation. However, Marx went on from this balance point to develop and elaborate his analysis of power, but left the complementary analysis of social integration behind. Modern social science has taken the same path, concentrating, for the most part, on power in politics and economies at the macrolevel, with less concern for social integration, especially at the microlevel. Rogers’ reply to Gouldner has hit upon one reason that Goffman irritates his commentators.

But the basic source of irritation, it seems to me, does not concern topic or level, but Goffman’s basic method, making improper moves so as to poke through the thin sleeve of immediate reality. All of his work, virtually every sentence, is an attack on what Gouldner referred to as “ordinary language and conventional understandings.” Goffman’s main target of attack, moreover, is not only the language and understandings that obtain in our society as a whole. Perhaps the primary source of irritation for academics is that Goffman was also attacking their own language and assumptions. His method of investigation pointed toward a radically new social science.

Deconstructing Social Institutions

To appreciate the savage force of Goffman’s method, it will be necessary to digress for a moment into the nature of social institutions. G. H. Mead (1934) defined an institution as a system of beliefs and practices in which each participant incorporates not only her own attitude and role, but also the attitudes and roles of all the other participants. Mead used the example of the institution of private property. The pickpocket knows what to expect not only from the victim and the onlookers, but also from the police, judges, jailers, etc. Private property is an institution in a society in which each member knows and expects their own role and the roles of others, and the accompanying attitudes, but knows that virtually everyone else knows and expects them.

One crucial element that is not developed in Mead's account is what has come to be called the greediness of institutions. Manning (1980, 267) referred in passing to this quality with his comment that Goffman attacked hegemonic institutions. The attitudes and expectations that make up an institution are held in common with fervor; any violation is apt to be experienced as a shockingly personal attack because it shatters participants' sense of possibility, decency and reality. The God of all major institutions, not only religious ones, is a jealous God: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

Although there may be individuals and even segments in a society that do not participate in a basic institution, the overwhelming majority does. Because of the vehemence with which the majority upholds an institution, and the large size of the majority, the institution's demands are experienced by most persons as imperative. In Durkheim's phrase, they are felt to be external and constraining. But Durkheim's phrase doesn't do justice to the greediness of institutions, since it leaves out the fervor of attachment to them.

The dominant reality in any society is socially constructed, to use postmodern language. But this formulation has become a cliché because it is usually stated only abstractly. Considering the dominant reality as a system of interlocking social institutions may help flesh out the abstract idea.

Geertz's (1983) "common sense" can be taken as an illustration of a particular dominant institution. He makes the point that what is considered common sense in any particular society is culturally constructed, giving many examples showing how the commonsense of one society contradicts that of another (Scheff 1990, 137-142).

A crucial point implied by Geertz's consideration of commonsense is that it is always anti-reflexive, no matter what culture it occurs in:

Common sense represents matters...as being what they are by the simple nature of the case. An air of "of-courseness," a sense of "it figures" is cast over things... They are depicted as being inherent in the situation, intrinsic aspects of the situation, the way things go (1983, 139).

The idea that commonsense is anti-reflexive is a crucial point for understanding not only this particular instance, but also all other social institutions. What gives institutions their enormous power is that they are seen as self-evident, and therefore not available for questioning. If one does not even have that option, conformity is more or less automatic.

Geertz's comments on common sense can be applied intact to any dominant social institution. The attitude of the simpleness of reality that he says is characteristic of cultural systems of common sense applies equally well to all hegemonic institutions:

The world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated person takes it to be... the really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface...(1983, 139)

To give an example, it is my experience that the attitude of simpleness described by Geertz obtains for the large majority of person in Western societies toward psychotherapy. Their attitude is not necessarily contemptuous, although it often is. But it is dismissive. A relative of mine, a very intelligent person, recently told me that what goes on in psychotherapy is mostly navel-gazing. Except for a fairly small psychologically minded middle-class group in the United States,

this attitude is nearly universal in modern societies. It is a spin-off from a more formidable institution in Western societies, the myth of the self-contained individual, discussed below.

If, as I have suggested, everyday reality is made up of a system of interlocking institutions, than a reflexive social science would always challenge them. As Schutz (1962) pointed out, the smooth functioning of the status quo of a society requires in its members what is nearly an identical set of presuppositions, “the attitude of daily life.” This attitude is accepted totally and without question. Those that accept it are seen as normal, sane, regular persons. They are thought of as “fitting in,” as “our sort.” They are gleigeschalten (meshing smoothly like the gears of a perfectly engineered machine). Not only do their thoughts, actions, and feelings mesh with those of others, but the enmeshment is perfectly aligned: there is no friction.

But Goffman’s writing shatters the calm surface of everyday life, it notices and comments upon what is to be taken for granted by members in good standing. It therefore challenges the sanctity of daily life by implying that it, like other any other social institution, is constructed. Goffman’s writing is radical not in a political sense; it is more primitive than that. It proposes not a political/economic revolution, but a revolution in culture.

It was Goffman’s challenge to all dominant institutions that confused Gouldner and other reviewers who criticized Goffman’s politics or lack of politics. His method of investigation was more fundamental than the politics of left and right, which is highly conventional compared to Goffman’s incursions.

Before Science

The grip that established institutions have even on science has been nicely caught by the philosopher Quine (1979):

The neatly worked inner stretches of science are an open space in the tropical jungle, created by clearing tropes [metaphors] away” (1979, p. 160. Quoted by Manning 1992, p. 147).

That is to say, it often happens that before scientific procedures can be applied, an obstructive metaphor has to be overthrown. Manning applies Quine’s dictum to Goffman’s metaphors (drama, games, ritual, etc) etc., suggesting that in the course of his career, Goffman made progress toward clearing away or at least qualifying his own metaphors. But Manning doesn’t give full weight to what to me is the more significant point, the importance of Goffman’s metaphors in clearing a way for social science itself.

The history of the physical sciences is full of examples of the clearing away of obstructive tropes. Progress in the astronomy of planetary motion was delayed for over a century because of the trope that the earth was the center of the universe. This idea is a correlate of a social institution that might be called universal ethnocentrism: we human beings are the center and purpose of the cosmos. Astronomers, like everyone else, took for granted that the planets circled around the earth. In the 16th century, Brahe had made a very accurate charting of the transit of Venus². But he could not plot the shape of the orbit because he assumed Venus was orbiting around the earth. Kepler, who obtained the data after Brahe’s death, was equally puzzled for many years.

² My discussion of the discovery of the orbit of Venus follows Koestler 1959.

The idea of logocentric universe was so ingrained that Kepler hit upon the solution only inadvertently. In an attempt to get past whatever it was that was obscuring the solution, he devised a geometric model of the planetary orbits based on solid figures representing polyhedrons. The model was ridiculous except for one feature; Kepler had inadvertently placed the sun, rather than the earth, at the center.

Similarly, Einstein began work on the theory of relativity with a joke concerning persons passing each other on trains, trying to determine their speed relative to each other. He realized intuitively that this situation challenged the ruling trope that time and motion were absolute. Although he had a doctorate in physics, Einstein knew little mathematics. He had to get help to put his anti-trope into mathematical form.

Quine's formulation captures the primitive, intuitive element necessary for scientific advance. Goffman's work seems to have made the deconstruction of ruling tropes its main goal. This goal would explain why he seemed to start afresh with each work. He was not trying to establish a theory, method or evidence. "Look," he might have said, "it's easy to construct an alternative universe. All you need is escape velocity from our immediate cultural reality."

Freud and Goffman's Challenge to Institutions

Freud's work can be used to provide an example of another writer who seemed to have an instinct for challenging dominant institutions. Like Goffman, his principal attack was on the myth of the self-contained individual. His attack concerned a different component than Goffman's, the idea of rational self-control.

Freud's early studies challenged another dominant institution of his era, male superiority. When he reported a case of male hysteria to his local medical society, he was surprised by the vehemence and disgust of the response. A much wider shock was caused by his study that suggested that neurosis was caused by child molestation, usually in the form of father/daughter incest. Freud quickly recanted from this thesis, perhaps because of the hostility of his colleagues. The institution of male superiority was so powerful that Freud's challenge led his colleagues to threaten expulsion.

Toward the end of his life, Freud took on the institution of organized religion, which in his time was still one of the dominant institutions. In The Future of an Illusion (1927), he had the temerity to argue that religion acted as a mechanism of defense, warding off not only pain and suffering, but also reality.

Like Goffman, Freud's main substantive challenge was to the core social institution of Western societies, the belief in the self-contained individual. The basic premise of Freud's work was that unconscious thoughts, motives and feelings formed the core of the self, from which he never recanted. The idea of the unconscious has not only not been accepted in Western societies, it is usually not even seriously considered. The average layperson, and perhaps even the average academic, simply dismisses this idea out of hand, as in one of Geertz's examples of the attitude of common sense. Certainly the premise of rational choice is far more prevalent in current social science, and is accepted with little critical evaluation. The idea that psychotherapy involves little more than navel-gazing, mentioned earlier, is one of many corollaries of the institution of individualism.

Unlike Goffman, Freud was emotionally committed to the substantive areas he investigated, since they were closely connected to his work as a practitioner. Goffman, on the other hand, was free to

enter and leave substantive areas at will. Perhaps that is one reason he was better able than Freud to maintain a reflexive stance with respect to his own work.

Goffman's primary interest was not in deconstructing the institution of the self-contained individual. Rather his focus was always on deconstructing all taken-for-granted conventions in social science, of "unmasking vested orthodoxies wherever they were encountered" (Travers 2000). His legacy is one of intellectual revolution, undermining the status quo, especially the conceptual status quo of scholars and researchers.

Was Goffman a Free-floating Intellectual?

I think it was Goffman's challenge to the assumptive grounds, the overall footing, of social science that was most irritating to those who have commented on his work, even the most appreciative of them. In one of the broadest of reviews, Collins appreciates and criticizes simultaneously:

Goffman seems hyper-reflexive; he himself manifests an extreme form of role-distance, separating himself from any clear, straightforward position, be it theoretical or popular. In this sense, he appears as the epitome of the 1950's intellectual; hip to the point of unwillingness to take any strong stance, even the stance of his own hipness (1980, 206).

On the one hand, Collins has alluded to what I take to be the central feature of all of Goffman's writing; it is "hyper-reflexive." On the other hand, to accuse him of a pose (hipness) seems not only misguided, but also suggests irritation.

Lemert, perhaps the most appreciative of all of the commentators, suggested that as in his contemporaries, Riesman, Mills, Whyte, etc., a critique of contemporary society could be found in Goffman:

...contrary to the impression that he lacked a social consciousness, he actually worked out his own, admittedly perverse and muted, social critique of American in the 1950's (Lemert 1997, p. xxiv).

As in the Collins passage, there is a slap mixed in with the praise, in "perverse and muted." The idea that Goffman's social critique was "muted" is like Collins' complaint that Goffman "separated himself from any clear, straightforward position." As already indicated, I think that there is some justice to the charge that Goffman's position is muted or not clear, because he didn't adequately explain his intent. But another reason might have to do more with us readers than with Goffman; that his work is so advanced that we haven't yet understood it.

The surprising part of the Lemert passage is the choice of the word perverse. It seems to me that a more appropriate word would have been subversive. As suggested, Goffman's work cuts the ground out from everyone, including the most insightful and appreciative. The implication I draw is that none of us, not even his fans, are yet as free of the assumptive world as Goffman. We haven't caught up with him yet.

Does that mean that I think that Goffman was indeed a free-floating intellectual in all areas? By no means. I think he went further than anyone in social science, but he himself had at least one area in which he was as entrapped as anyone else. Giddens (1988) has pointed out that Goffman's interaction order, his arena of supreme competence, can be seen as a link between to two other crucial arenas: the psychology of the individual, and macrosystems of the larger society, political,

economic, linguistic, and so on. Giddens went on to say that Goffman did little in exploring such links, largely because he ignored both macrosystems and individual psychology.

But I think that Goffman wasn't prejudiced against studying macrosystems. In his early work, he was too busy charting the interaction order. But even in that early work, some of his ideas pointed toward larger systems, e.g., the concept of the total institution. Later he was clearly moving toward such systems, the institutions of gender and of language (Goffman 1979 and 1981). One of the concepts from his later work, "footing" (the presuppositions held in common by persons engaged in dialogue), can be extended from the micro world setting he intended to the macroworld. In this world, the footing becomes the set of presuppositions held in common by all persons in dialogue in a given society. Goffman's use of the term footing seems to be an application of Schutz's idea of the attitude of everyday life applied to specific interactions.

But I think that he was prejudiced toward individual psychology, entrapped in a way that was quite similar to his fellow Americans. One early indication is his omission of the experiential side of embarrassment, in the article³ in which sought to provide an explicit definition of that emotion. He also seemed ready to make remarks critical of psychology as a discipline, as in this comment (1983, p. 2):

...we (sociologists) haven't managed to produce in our students the high level of trained incompetence that psychologists have achieved in theirs, although, God knows, we're working on it (quoted in Lemert 1997, p xvii).

In my own contact with him, he often expressed reservations about my interest in connecting individual and social psychology with societal process. It was not the societal part he objected to; he never complained about my interest in large-scale process. It was only the psychology part.

One example will suffice. I told him, in the late seventies, that I was writing a book on catharsis (Scheff 1979); he responded that I should leave that topic to psychologists. I said that they are not studying catharsis and seemed to have no intention to do so. His response was an exasperated sigh and curt dismissal: "You (Tom) can always find a wall to be off of."

I dwell on Goffman's prejudice against individual psychology at some length, because I think it illustrates an important general point. An intellectual can be free-floating in some arenas, as Goffman was with respect to the interaction order, but entrapped in others. Mannheim (1936) had distinguished between two kinds of rigid assumptive worlds, ideology and utopia. He used the word ideology in a much broader sense than it is ordinarily used: he meant the entire assumptive world that underlies the status quo in a given society.

In Mannheim's sense, a utopia was a reaction against the prevailing ideology, a counter culture. Initially it may liberate creative forces in the rebels, when they are still capable of seeing the world both in the old and in the new way. But over time, as the utopians lose touch with the old ideology, the utopia degenerates into an institution restrictive as the status quo that was rejected. The utopians reject the holders of ideology as much as those holders reject them. Psychoanalytic theory, offering a binocular vision in its early days, now has its own cultural status quo. On a grander scale, Western individualism stands as a rigid utopia towards the rigid social enmeshment of traditional and Asian societies. Goffman rebelled against most of the dominant institutions, but not against the bias in social science and society against the psychology of individuals.

³ Goffman 1956. An expanded version can be found in Goffman (1967).

Conclusion

Is there any remedy for social science? Mainstream social science, for the most part, continues to ignore the basic implications of Goffman's substantive work. One example would be the methodological individualism upon which most social science research is based. Sample surveys, for the most part, still use individuals as their basic sources. Those parts of self that Goffman suggested are reflections of social arrangements are automatically ignored. Most psychological scales have the same limitation. Even that research which seeks only to explore the psychology of individuals seems unaware of Goffman's subtle approach to interaction, such as the effects of the subject's relationship with the interviewer or test administrator, and the larger social context in which the data is gathered.

Since there don't seem to be any new Goffmans on the horizon, perhaps we all need to practice his art of deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions in social science, not just the Western fascination with the individual. To be as effective as Goffman, we all need to be marginal persons, like him. Any exposure to new perspectives can open the door: partaking of a culture new to us, as in participant observation, learning a new language, reading fiction that serves as entrance to new and different worlds. Living in a new town or country, or undertaking psychotherapy, can also serve as gateways to bisociation, of having binocular vision.

In terms of substantive issues, I think that linking the macroworld, interaction order, and individual psychology is the most pressing need in social science, as Giddens (1988) suggested. An example is provided by the extraordinary book Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious (1999), by Billig. He arranges a collision between discourse analysis and psychoanalytic theory, by using dialogue from Freud's cases and from his life. As a result, Billig is able to modify the theory in a way that grounds it in actual data. The way he gets to institutional anti-Semitism in the Vienna of Freud's time from the dialogue between Freud and Dora is nothing less than inspired.

In my own work I made a halting step toward connecting the three arenas in my analysis of emotional bases of the origins of the two world wars (Scheff 1994). It is little more than a sketch, but I show how various texts suggest that in the period 1871-1914 France and Germany were entangled in a collective spiral of shame/rage, and how Hitler's appeal to the German people was based on shame/rage. If anyone knows of other attempts, I would like to hear about them.

In the meantime, since Goffman went further in freeing himself from the restrictions of our assumptive reality, perhaps we should hew to the lines that he was establishing. Several of Goffman's reviewers have suggested directions that could systematize his work as a tool for further research (See Williams particularly, on Goffman's methods: Ch. 4 in Drew and Wooton, and Manning (1992) on combining many of Goffman's ideas to construct a viable theory). Until we have a new Goffman, perhaps we still have to make the most of the old one.

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