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GOFFMAN ON GOFFMAN: A 1975 LETTER¹

Abstract

The posthumous publication of Goffman's ASA Presidential Address [Goffman 1983] assured that his legacy would be known as the sociology of the interaction order. But exactly how the 11 books and numerous articles making up his oeuvre were related to each other remains an enigma. In the absence of an explicit drive towards cumulateness or any apparent willingness on Goffman's part to disclose the orderliness of his writings, commentators have made many attempts to reconstruct his oeuvre. Goffman's silence on this question has been broken by the discovery of a letter by Goffman to Allen Day Grimshaw (1929–2011), who worked as a professor of sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA. Relevant portions of the letter are discussed, and Goffman's construction of his oeuvre is assessed in light of his disclaimers urging scepticism towards what authors tell their readers about their work.

Keywords: Erving Goffman, oeuvre, letters, intellectual biography, trickster

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ADDRESSING AN ENIGMA

“Enigma” is one of the commonest terms used to describe Goffman’s sociological writings. Commentators [e.g., Posner 1978; Fontana 1980; Lemert 2003; Jacobsen, Kristiansen 2010; Ranci 2021] have directed attention to the many respects in which Goffman’s writings are puzzling and difficult to interpret. Their larger point or purpose has not been easy to grasp, and Goffman’s own reluctance to provide guidance continues to perplex readers. One dimension of the enigma concerns the relationship between the 11 books and numerous articles making up Goffman’s oeuvre. What is the connection between them? To be sure, each book or article addressed aspects of the social organization of the interaction order [Goffman 1983] and how ordinary experience was framed [Goffman 1974]. Yet every publication was written in a self-contained way, with few indications of the links between the separate works – “each written as though the others had never been” [Sharrock 1976: 333]. Of course, Goffman did cite his own works – indeed, as Michael Hviid Jacobsen [2022] discovered, Goffman figured as the single most-cited author in the footnotes of his own writings. However, the self-citations only concerned matters of detail, indicating overlaps and developments in his thinking rather than taking in the entire sweep of his books. Conspicuously absent was an account spelling out the broad connections between individual texts and how they contributed to developing the study of face-to-face interaction as the “sub-area of sociology” that Goffman [1969: ix] claimed was his “ultimate interest.” By neglecting to consider how his growing oeuvre could be arranged, Goffman seemed to signal that getting on with the work in hand was more important than turning to reflect upon what was accomplished thereby.

This article draws upon a letter written by Goffman in 1975 that sheds direct light on the question of how Goffman saw the component elements of his oeuvre. Other scholars – notably Gary Jaworski [2000] – have found Goffman’s letters a fruitful source of contextual and biographical information. However, the often-noted absence of a Goffman archive means that coverage of Goffman’s letters has been patchy, dependent upon what can be discovered in the archived records of scholars with whom he corresponded. This article presents part of the text of a 1975 letter written by Goffman to Allen Day Grimshaw (1929–2011), who worked as a professor of sociology at Indiana University, Bloomington, USA between 1959 and 1994 [<https://honorsandawards.iu.edu/awards/honoree/4042.html>]. Grimshaw and Goffman were colleagues and friends of long standing [Grimshaw 1983]. In the 1970s and 1980s, Grimshaw taught an undergraduate course entitled Topics in Sociological Theory: The Sociology of Erving Goffman (S441).

In 1975, Grimshaw managed to bring Goffman to Bloomington to speak and to field questions from students taking the class. On Thursday November 13, 1975, Goffman visited and spoke to the class for about three hours even though, as Grimshaw [1987] would later recall, he was suffering from a cold. It was surely this 1975 class that Grimshaw [1983: 148] had in mind when he wrote in the weeks following Goffman's death: "He knew his position in the market and drove hard bargains with publishers and would-be impresarios; he would also spend hours answering questions from a colleague's undergraduate class in a charming, clear, and sympathetic manner – at no cost."

THE LETTER

Some months prior to the visit, Grimshaw and Goffman corresponded about the arrangements to be put in place to ensure a successful classroom event. In a letter to Grimshaw dated May 19, 1975, Goffman wrote: "If you continue with your foolhardy plan to teach a course on my books, I will come and visit you near the end of term and spend a session without script answering questions from the students." Goffman went on to acknowledge that it might be unrealistic to ask students to read in their entirety all his nine books then published. Instead, "the analytically sound thing to do would be to recommend certain sections from each." Goffman then presented a list of books and chapters arranged under five themes. The passage from the letter is reproduced here with its original punctuation and capitalization:

1. The theme of expression-communication and appearance-reality: PRESENTATION OF SELF, STRATEGIC INTERACTION, "Normal Appearances" (in RELATIONS IN PUBLIC), FRAME ANALYSIS.
2. Ethnographic: ASYLUMS, "Role Distance" (in ENCOUNTERS).
3. Conversational interaction and the structure of ritual interchanges: "On Face Work" (in INTERACTION RITUAL), "The Frame Analysis of Talk" (in FRAME ANALYSIS), "Supportive Interchanges" and "Remedial Interchanges" (in RELATIONS IN PUBLIC), "The [*sic*] Alienation from Interaction" and "Embarrassment and Social Organization" (in INTERACTION RITUAL), "Fun in Games" (in ENCOUNTERS).
4. The management of co-presence: BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC PLACES, "Deference and Demeanor" (in INTERACTION RITUAL), "The Individual as a Unit," "Territories of the Self," "Tie-Signs" (in RELATIONS IN PUBLIC).
5. Expression and character: "Role Distance," "Where the Action Is" (in INTERACTION RITUAL), "Embarrassment and Social Organization."

In presenting this ordering of his writings Goffman sought to address a practical classroom issue for Grimshaw the teacher. His recommendations were hedged with reservations: “Taking two or three of these themes may, I repeat, may, provide greater analytical coherence with the same number of reading pages. But who knows?” The substance of the letter ends there. The initials “Eg/LAD” appearing after Goffman’s name suggest that the letter was possibly dictated and quite likely typed by Lee Ann Draud, his administrative and research assistant at the University of Pennsylvania.

The letter itself was part of the routine business of arranging a university visit and ensuring that the session with the students went well. Now, however, it can be read for the insight it offers into how Goffman saw his own work. The letter is remarkable because it is the only place where Goffman tried to order his oeuvre. It has no counterpart in the books themselves. As noted, Goffman failed to provide the metanarrative that would show how the diverse works were arranged as a single corpus of writings. In the letter, Goffman supplies that metanarrative so conspicuously absent. Goffman’s depiction of the themes presents his view, in his own terms, of the analytic ideas spanning different parts of the oeuvre. Yet none of the themes were elaborated upon by Goffman. What might an explication of each of them include? An initial sketch follows.

THE LETTER’S THEMES

The first, “the theme of expression-communication and appearance-reality”, connects the concerns of his first book, *The presentation of self in everyday life* [1959], with his then most recent book, *Frame analysis* [1974]. Goffman suggests that these two books and the other works listed are linked by the questions about the communicative significance of human expressivity, first broached in the important dissertation chapter on “Expressive behavior” [Goffman 1953: 50–70] and developed in his explorations of situated expressivity that centred around *The presentation of self in everyday life*’s famous “expressions given/given off” distinction. The “appearance-reality” issue was also raised in that first book. The more the interactant sought to establish the other’s real motives, real attitudes and so forth, the more they must rely on interpreting the details of appearances, the expressions given and given off by the other [Goffman 1959: 248–251]. The quest to ascertain the reality of these expressions led interactants into an “information game – a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” [Goffman 1959: 8], the ramifications of which were explored extensively in *Strategic interaction*, “Normal appearances” and *Frame analysis*.

On initially scanning the writings Goffman listed under the first theme it would be easy to gloss these as broadly “dramaturgical” in character. Caution is required here because Goffman was decisive in rejecting dramaturgy as an *overall* characterization of his sociology [Verhoeven 1993: 320]. Of course, the term dramaturgy resurfaced in his later writings, where it caught the specific dimensions of his later preoccupations with talk’s forms [Goffman 1974: chapter 10; Goffman 1981a]. With the expression-communication and appearance-reality pair of contrasts, Goffman offered a more precise characterization that better reflected his animating ideas than did the broad-brush depiction of these ideas as “dramaturgical”.

The next theme outlined in the Grimshaw letter, “Ethnographic”, looks at first sight an all-encompassing term for the kind of observational work that Goffman did in so striking a manner and which informs all his writings. But a second look leads us to realize that Goffman adverts to his postdoctoral spells of fieldwork, notably the year in the field carried out at St Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, DC, between 1955 and 1956 (reported in *Asylums*), and the observation of surgical operations begun there and then continued at the Herrick Memorial Hospital, Berkeley, once Goffman relocated to the West Coast in 1958. The surgery ethnography figured as a major illustrative resource in “Role distance”. The identification of the ethnographic as a distinct theme underscores the importance that Goffman, like Robert E. Park before him, accorded first-hand observation. Omitted from this theme is “Where the action is”, which was to be the only place where Goffman’s ethnography of casino conduct was given extensive deployment as an illustrative resource. All told, in the decade or so starting with his Shetland research, Goffman undertook ethnographic projects in four very different locales: an island community, a mental hospital, surgical theatres and casinos. Small wonder that Goffman felt entitled to consider the ethnographic as a leading theme of his work, even though it was not ethnography as conventionally understood but rather the “analytic ethnography” that John Lofland [1995] outlined. It is interesting that “Role distance” was first thought of by Goffman as an ethnographic piece, considering its substantial critique of functionalist role theory. Its inclusion under the ethnographic heading supports Goffman’s claim to be working inductively and helps underscore his insistence that his concepts “came after and not before the facts” [Goffman 1953: 9; Verhoeven 1993].

The third theme, “Conversational interaction and the structure of ritual interchanges”, takes us right to the heart of Goffman’s distinctive approach to spoken interaction. Goffman’s emphasis on the ritual dimension of interaction – that interactants do not merely take others into consideration, as George Herbert Mead and Max Weber suggested, but that they show consideration to each other through

the manner in which a variety of small acts are carried out – was first articulated in Goffman’s 1953 dissertation. There Goffman argued that the kind of regard shown an idol or god is an extreme form of the regard routinely given other persons: “an idol is to a person as a rite is to etiquette” [Goffman 1953: 104]. Goffman’s first extended analysis of the ritual foundations of social interaction was the face-work paper published in 1955, but ritual remained an abiding feature of Goffman’s approach right through to his last book, *Forms of talk* [1981]. The investigation of these ritual aspects of interaction was productive not only for Goffman’s own work; it opened significant streams of sociolinguistic research [O’Driscoll, 2022]. However, doubts about the relevance of ritual notions also formed the basis for some of the more vociferous critiques of his work [Kemper 2011; Schegloff 1988]. As the writings Goffman names under this heading also indicate, his approach to conversational interaction also included a strong concern with the sources of disruption to the smooth enactment of conversational interaction, evident in analyses of embarrassment and the various ways persons can become alienated from encounters in which they are meant to be spontaneously involved.

“The management of co-presence” (sometimes “copresence”) was the fourth theme described in Goffman’s letter. Copresence initially appeared as a distinct term in the first of Goffman’s books on public order. Under “full conditions of copresence” Goffman suggested that “persons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing... and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived” [Goffman 1963a: 17]. Interestingly, Goffman singled out “Deference and demeanor” among his early papers as exemplifying the management of co-presence theme, implying that he became more fully aware of the significance of situational proprieties from his early study of two mental hospital wards that made up the article’s main data source. Of course, it was *Behavior in public places* [1963a] that broke new ground by demonstrating how public places were not asocial realms outside of the purview of sociology but on the contrary were deeply shaped by social considerations, notably by the rule of “civil inattention”. More generally, the work on individuals as participatory and vehicular units, the territories of the self, and tie signs showed the importance of expressions given off or exuded in the arrangement of social life in the public realm. The notion of co-presence continues to have traction among digital communication researchers addressing questions about the technological shaping of being with others [e.g., Lunt 2022; Walsh 2022].

Perhaps the least obvious and most difficult theme to fathom is the final item on Goffman’s list, “Expression and character”, in which the papers on role distance, action and embarrassment stand as examples. While Goffman [1967: 2–3]

claimed that his analytical gaze was centred on the syntax of interaction, he held that it was reasonable to inquire also about the “general properties” of the interactant. “Character” was a property of the interactant that could be displayed in situations of “action”. The role distance concept was designed to go beyond “the usual deterministic implications of role analysis” to show how, when the “moment-to-moment conduct” of individuals is examined, they do “not remain passive in the face of the potential meanings that are generated regarding” themselves. Rather, individuals sought alternative definitions of the situation consistent with how they saw themselves through, for example, explanations, apologies and joking [Goffman 1961b: 104]. These devices enabled individuals to neutralize or disqualify how they were portrayed by the situation. Yet there were limits to these re-definitional efforts. From the point of view of the interaction order, individuals who repeatedly wrecked encounters by chronic awkwardness or embarrassment were termed “faulty persons” [Goffman 1953: 258–272, 1967: 135]. Overall, Goffman [1974: 564] aimed to include self and interaction within the same framework of analysis. Interaction critically reflected upon the selves (and specifically the character) of participants: He drew attention to the sociological importance of how interactants handled themselves during interaction. Thus, Goffman’s reasoning was central to the sociology of the person [Cahill 1998].

TAKING SERIOUSLY THE INSIDER’S ACCOUNT

Clearly, not each of the five themes are of equivalent standing, mixing as they do an approach (ethnography) with key units of the interaction order (conversational interaction, ritual interchanges), with a defining condition of the interaction order (co-presence) and with general questions about situated expressivity (expression and communication, appearances and reality, expression and character). Goffman’s arrangement of his own writings shows him engaged in the same classificatory work that his sociological work does so well. Like many of his taxonomies, they do not comprehensively cover all of his published work (*Stigma* is conspicuously absent) and have the same tentative or provisional quality to them. Two items, “Role distance” and “Embarrassment and social organization”, appear under two different headings. This need not be read as a categorization fault: as Goffman [1974, 1979] reminds us in his reflections on the use of framing and gender display concepts, this is to be expected because the “same” experience and conduct can be analysed from different points of view. This is presumably also true of his writings. However, it would be wrong to think that many of the items placed under one heading could just as plausibly figure under others. For example, it might be

thought that nearly all the items listed could feature under the fourth theme, “the management of co-presence”. However, closer inspection shows that the heading covers writings that deal with unfocused interaction, in contrast to the previous theme, conversational interaction. While the second category, “ethnographic”, looks like a residual category, a catch-all to pick up those writings that cannot be placed neatly elsewhere, it could also be read as a way of accommodating those items that owe their origins to discoveries Goffman made in the field.

The 1975 letter offers a view of the themes running across his writings in Goffman’s own terms. The durability of Goffman’s fivefold formulation of his work’s main themes can be seen in the ease with which it can incorporate his post-1975 publications. Thus, “The arrangement between the sexes” [Goffman 1977], “Gender display”, “Gender commercials” [in Goffman 1979] and “The interaction order’ [Goffman 1983a] developed the fourth theme, the management of co-presence. “Picture frames” [in Goffman 1979] sits neatly in the first theme, expression-communication and appearance-reality, by bringing frame analysis to bear upon questions about the nature of photographic representation. His last book, *Forms of talk* [Goffman 1981a], and the posthumously published “Felicity’s condition” [Goffman 1983b], refined and extended Goffman’s analyses of the letter’s third theme, conversational interaction and the structure of ritual interchanges.

We can only guess about how much thought Goffman put into the classification. The omission of *Stigma* might suggest it was constructed on the fly in response to a colleague’s request for assistance. (Allen Grimshaw, who subsequently used the categories as the basis for organizing the weekly schedule for his Goffman course [Grimshaw 1978], assigned *Stigma* under his own un-Goffmanesque heading: “The sociologist as a student of the management of pain.”) The most plausible explanation for the omission of *Stigma* [Goffman 1963b] is simple oversight. However, it is interesting to speculate where Goffman might have located it – perhaps in the first category, “expression-communication and appearance-reality”; or in the fourth category, “the management of co-presence”; or perhaps even in the fifth category, “expression and character”?

What does the letter suggest about the character of Goffman’s oeuvre? An initial reading might be that the letter offers insight into how Goffman saw his own work and specifically what he saw as the broad analytic impulses animating his intellectual production. Certainly, the letter gives no indication of a grand theory of interaction about to come into being – indeed, it confirms the opposite, that Goffman did not aspire to such theoretical ambitions [see also Goffman 1981c]. Nor did it give any special attention to *Frame analysis* [1974], his recently completed magnum opus. Certainly, the letter’s classification presents an intriguing

oeuvre-ordering device that is perhaps all the more valuable for being stated in Goffman's own terms. Thus, this insubstantial missive seems to warrant close attention for its unique insight into Goffman's self-understanding of the leading themes of his sociological work and how these themes are instantiated in his books and articles.

The absence of a conventional Goffman archive has long acted as barrier to a better understanding of Goffman's enigmatic sociology. Faced with the lack of standard sources (manuscript drafts, correspondence, diaries, photographs, and the like) that normally become available after the death of a notable scholar, a kind of salvage ethnography has had to be undertaken. This work of recovery was initiated by Yves Winkin. In a series of pioneering endeavours since 1983, he interviewed Goffman's colleagues, students, family members and acquaintances and gathered associated documentary materials [see for example, Winkin 1984, 1988, 1999, 2000, 2010, 2022a, 2022b; Winkin, Leeds-Hurwitz 2013; Smith, Winkin 2013]. Since 2007 Dmitri Shalin undertook a similar endeavour, making available online his interviews and documentary materials through the Erving Goffman Archives [<http://cdclv.unlv.edu/ega/>]. The recovery of the Grimshaw letter underlines the value of scrutinizing the archives of those with whom Goffman corresponded – an epistolary potential originally foreshadowed by Jaworski [2000] but awaiting further extension.

This brief article makes a small contribution to this body of work. It makes available a hitherto unknown letter in which Goffman – albeit laconically – framed his own oeuvre. It seems to show us how Erving Goffman saw Goffman's sociology. There is no equivalent to the construal found in this letter in Goffman's published work or in the materials assembled by Winkin or Shalin. Taken at face value then, the letter's wider significance is that it represents Goffman's only known attempt to order his oeuvre.

However, Goffman did not want us to take such statements at face value. A measured framing of the 1975 letter must take Goffman's reservations into account. The reservations centre upon Goffman's own reluctance to treat seriously what people say about what they think and do as a worthwhile source of sociological data. Goffman's scepticism towards the use of interviews as a reliable source of information about people's beliefs was stated starkly in his 1974 talk on fieldwork [Goffman 1989] and amplified in separate 1980 interviews with journalist Peter David and sociologist Jef Verhoeven. Goffman placed greater store by what he could observe rather than by what people told him about whatever they were doing or thinking. Goffman's views reiterated a position first developed during his MA thesis research, which was based upon 50 interviews with middle class

housewives in the Hyde Park district of Chicago [Goffman 1949; Smith 2003]. In the thesis Goffman arrived at a position that downgraded consideration of the content of the interview talk in favour of an analysis directed towards how they conducted themselves during the course of the interviews.

To Verhoeven [1993: 322] he proposed reasons for not treating too seriously an author's avowals about their work:

It seems to me that you can't get a picture of anyone's work by asking them what they do or by reading explicit statements in their texts about what they do. Because that's by and large all doctrine and ideology. You have to get it by doing a literary kind of analysis of the corpus of their work... if you take a person's version of what they do, you will end up with a very superficial view of what goes on and, furthermore, you will be contributing a statement that itself will act as a barrier to anyone else finding out what goes on.

Warming to his theme Goffman [in Verhoeven 1993: 323] continued:

What I actually do when I write things is another question. I don't know that, really. Somebody else has got to analyze that as you would a literary text. In that line of endeavour, what other people have said won't do you any good but only do you harm.

Goffman was happy to offer Verhoeven his thoughts but cautioned him that they were merely "doctrine" that obscured the real understanding of what those writings amounted to, which could be better achieved by the textual methods of literary analysis. Goffman's claims here are wide open to debate since the dismissal of authorial avowals as "doctrine and ideology" neglects the long tradition going back at least to Max Weber that has stressed how self-understandings are integral to grasping the meaning of actions. As for the hyperbolic claim that "what other people have said... [will] only do you harm", it is difficult to read this as anything other than a disclaimer designed primarily for rhetorical effect.

In response to the idea that the corpus of his writings could be characterized as an oeuvre standing as a single entity ("Goffman's sociology"), Goffman was again sceptical. Speaking to Peter David in 1980, he suggested that treating the life and work of an individual sociologist was fundamentally unsound and a "low form of hero worship" [David 1980: 7]. Goffman freely admitted that there were inconsistencies between his books and even within the chapters of a single book. Goffman stated that if there was any consistency at all to his sociology, then that was fortuitous, arising from the simple fact that any one person was only likely to have so many ideas. He was not interested in discovering whatever continuities did exist and in exposing them to public view. The idea that there was a diversity in his writings that could not be reduced to a single system or

perspective was stressed by Goffman [1981b: 61] in reply to his critics, Norman Denzin and Charles Keller:

This vested interest in treating an individual's diverse efforts as a succinctly characterizable corpus supports a crude fallacy: that at any current moment in his working life, the true nature and purpose of his doings can be unmasked, reconstituting how they are to be correctly understood, and predicting what can only come of them hereafter.

In fact, the 1975 letter to Grimshaw is consistent with Goffman's argument since it did *not* offer a succinct characterization (in Denzin and Keller's case, of Goffman's work as fundamentally structuralist in character) but rather a set of five themes that surfaced in different ways through the "diverse efforts" of his writings.

As these remarks show, Goffman was increasingly uncomfortable about his work becoming a discrete topic of study. Elsewhere, he would insist that "sociology is something that you do, not something you write about" [Smith 1999: 18]. The chameleon-like, shape-shifting qualities of Goffman's sociology have often attracted comment. Goffman's embrace of ambiguity and contradictoriness was best captured by Dell Hymes' [1984: 628] invocation of the American Indian figure of the trickster. The trickster's range of character ran from noble benefactor to buffoon. Mainly, however, the trickster was "smart but improper." The image fits Goffman's equivocations well. He was constantly resistant to having his work pinned down.

Like any author Goffman was perfectly entitled to ask, as he did when talking to Peter David [1980: 7], for "his publications to speak and be judged for themselves" because they contained "the best and clearest exposition of his ideas", and if they failed, then nothing said "in loose conversation afterwards" could provide a remedy. Goffman was right to note how loose conversation is unlikely to shed much light on questions of importance. While not a publication, a letter written to a colleague in good faith, months in advance of a university class that both teachers were committed to making a success, is far from a "loose conversation". Therein rests whatever merit can be found in Goffman's 1975 letter that it has been the aim of this article to bring to wider attention.

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Greg Smith

GOFFMAN O GOFFMANIE: LIST Z 1975 ROKU

Abstrakt

Pośmiertna publikacja „prezydenckiego przesłania” (*Presidential Address*), które Goffman przygotował jako przewodniczący Amerykańskiego Towarzystwa Socjologicznego (ASA) [Goffman 1983] zapewniła, że jego spuścizna będzie rozpoznawana jako socjologia ładu interakcyjnego. Jednak to, jak dokładnie 11 książek i liczne artykuły, składające się na jego naukowy dorobek, były ze sobą powiązane, pozostaje zagadką. Wobec braku wyraźnego dążenia do kumulacji lub widocznej chęci ze strony Goffmana do ujawnienia uporządkowania swoich prac, komentatorzy podjęli wiele prób zrekonstruowania jego twórczości. Milczenie Goffmana w tej kwestii zostało przerwane przez odkrycie listu Goffmana do Allena Daya Grimshawa (1929-2011), profesora socjologii na Uniwersytecie Indiany w Bloomington w USA. W artykule omówione zostają istotne fragmenty tego listu, a stworzona tam przez Goffmana konstrukcja jego całościowego dzieła oceniana jest w świetle jego własnych zastrzeżeń, nawołujących do sceptycyzmu wobec tego, co autorzy mówią czytelnikom o swojej pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: Erving Goffman, dorobek naukowy, listy, biografia intelektualna, *trickster*