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ERVING GOFFMAN'S SYSTEMATIC SOCIOLOGY OF INFORMATION

Abstract

As part of Erving Goffman's Centennial celebrations, this paper looks at his work pioneering the sociology of information. Goffman developed a theory of information *sui generis*, that was independent from extant studies of information. Goffman's considerations of information suffuse his writings. These are systematic in that they develop and advance throughout his work. However, his contributions to the study of information are only just beginning to be recognized. Prevailing views of Goffman's work have obscured appreciation of his systematic treatment of information. Goffman was pursuing information as a topic at the same time as Harold Garfinkel. Information – and the systematic study of information – are highlighted as criteria for establishing continuities and discontinuities between Goffman and Garfinkel.

Keywords: Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, information, sociological perspectives, sociology of information, systematicity

INTRODUCTION

Given that the history of sociology goes back to the writings of Auguste Comte in the Nineteenth Century, the 'sociology of information' is a recent innovation. A tour of Twentieth Century sociology allows us to identify how the contours of a sociology of information were outlined prior to it being claimed as new sociological territory in the Twenty First Century. As I shall suggest in this paper, the

study of information, and the sociology of information, are different enterprises. Rather than outlining an agenda for a sociology of information, I shall bring extant work on information into greater relief, specifically, those contemporaneous corpora of work developed by Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel, which were initiated in the 1950s. It is my contention that this work is central to the sociology of information in its putative and substantive forms, and needs to be addressed in future studies.

Whereas Goffman scholarship, i.e., that body of literature that claims to advance Goffman's writings or to 'defend' Goffman from critique, takes Goffman's writings as, for instance, a 'sociology of information control' [Marx 2016], the reading of Goffman that I recommend in this paper asks the question: How can sociology address information without distorting it to fit into the sociological firmament? This re-replaces definitional privilege to readers, rather than relying on distortions or instructed readings that are available in Goffman scholarship.¹ Furthermore, this reading suggests that 'information' may be identified as a source of cumulativeness and systematicity that has hitherto escaped Goffman scholarship [Carlin 2022a].

Information constitutes a thematic topic for investigation that unites Goffman with Harold Garfinkel, displaying an elective affinity between them. This is a novel approach as the much-cited criteria for comparison are their respective works on 'passing': Garfinkel's [1967] 'Agnes', the intersexed person; and Goffman's [1963b] work on *stigma* and *impression management* [Goffman 1959]. These substantive topics have tended to narrow the field of explication and we may borrow from the philosopher Peter Winch [1974: 107] to suggest that these have become 'limiting notions' with which to compare Goffman and Garfinkel.

Goffman's early writings on information coincided with the private circulation of a set of manuscripts written by Harold Garfinkel. These manuscripts had been written in the service of a project that Garfinkel had been employed on at Princeton University. Decades later, these manuscripts were collected together and published [Garfinkel 2008]. We know that Goffman read Garfinkel's work on information as his annotated copy was found within his effects [see below]. Garfinkel's manuscripts are not acknowledged by Goffman, but to be clear, this is not to suggest that there was any lapse in scholarly integrity on the part of Goffman. The reader of Garfinkel's manuscripts learns that in order to produce a theory that includes social information the (then) extant theories of information do not provide the insights required. Indeed, this is how we can read Goffman on

¹ Watson [2009: 113–117] outlines how Goffman produced 'instructed readings' of his own texts. In this paper I am suggesting that Goffman scholarship produces instructed or preferred readings, also.

information. Goffman [1953] cites information-theoretic accounts within a conspectus of perspectives on information, but otherwise he begins his considerations of information from 'conceptual scratch' [Goffman 1971: xviii].

Goffman set precedents and conceptual frameworks that have sustained sociological studies. A brief enumeration that includes civil inattention, the dramaturgical metaphor and its appurtenances, face and facework, frames, impression management, keying, passing, presentation of self, stigma, and total institutions, points to the variety and immensity of Goffman's contributions. Underlying these is a theory of self. However, I contend that such conceptual frameworks that Goffman developed also contained a theory of information. Furthermore, readers have been encouraged to disattend the information capacities within Goffman's writings through instructed readings and distortions of Goffman's conceptual advances.

For example, a discussion of embodiment and intercorporeality provides an instructed reading of one of Goffman's books, *Relations in public*, and in so doing claims that 'embodied action not only provides the necessary information for the social/practical coordination of action, but also provides the information upon which judgements about self-hood and moral worth are made' [Crossley 1995: 139]. The article itself forces through a reading of *Relations in public* as a sociological version of philosophical arguments [Merleau-Ponty 1962, 1963]. Yet Crossley's article represents a missed opportunity: It takes 'information' as an unexplicated category; it relies upon 'information exchange', which Goffman mentions but does not endorse as a theory in its own right; and passes over those aspects of information that Goffman thought sociologically significant. Instead, informational auspices of Goffman's conceptual distinctions are consistent, systematic and textually available [Carlin 2022b] – Goffman is explicit about these if and when his works are taken as a gestalt rather than treated as an ever-changing 'spiral' [Manning 1992: 55]. Such distortions, I suggest, have precluded Goffman scholarship from explicating Goffman's theories of information and from identifying the full range of systematicity that is present within Goffman's work.

GOFFMAN'S 'PERSPECTIVE'

Goffman was a Durkheimian sociologist who set out to elaborate a range of phenomena that the prevailing orthodoxy of operationalism failed to recognize as sociological phenomena and ceded to other disciplines, such as psychology. One of Goffman's many achievements was to articulate how 'psychological phenomena' – phenomena that had until then been considered within the purview of psychology (behaviour, embarrassment, etc.) were eligible to sociological

inquiry. One means of prosecuting this thesis was arguing that such small-scale phenomena could be considered in Durkheimian terms, as small rituals that were performed by actors when they were in public situations. As such, Goffman identified a domain. This domain had gone unrecognized within sociology, and may be summarized as moments of *co-presence*. For Goffman, the intrinsic interest was with *interaction* – whether interaction between persons was face to face, from across the street, within home or work settings. The domain of interaction could be enfolded by orthodox sociology through the introduction of a contrast set – between ‘macro’ sociology and ‘micro’ sociology.

Goffman was explicit that his inquiries constituted ‘micro-sociology’ [Goffman 1981a], variously describing it also as ‘microanalysis’ [Goffman 1974] or ‘microecology’ [Goffman 1979, 1983b]. Furthermore, he was explicit that this micro-sociology could be compared favourably with (but differently from) orthodox sociology, which in its attention to social structures constituted macro sociology:

My concern over the years has been to promote acceptance of this face-to-face domain as an analytically viable one – a domain which might be titled, for want of any happy name, the interaction order – a domain whose preferred method of study is microanalysis [Goffman 1983a: 2]

Goffman’s work is propaedeutic for studying everyday life sociology. His corpus of work is pedagogically intriguing on various levels. First, Goffman allows sociology instruction that moves beyond a binary micro/macro or agency/structure conception of the discipline. *Asylums* [Goffman 1961] provides a case in point, as it brings the analysis of social processes to an institution; locates the institution within a larger societal structure; and draws out sociological features of an institution that warrant its formal identification as a ‘total’ institution. The generalizable properties of institutions identified within this book (‘total institutions’ and ‘moral orders’) elevate it as a model for leaving the micro/macro heuristic behind. Second, his work is thoroughly ensconced within the sociological firmament: Teachers can use the contents of Goffman’s corpus to illustrate how contributions to sociology are embedded within a lineage of debates. For example, the corpus can be seen as a continuation of the consideration of ‘self’ as a sociological concept and how Goffman’s work relates to Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and W. I. Thomas as well as Goffman’s contemporaries, including Anselm Strauss. Third, Goffman’s work constitutes a learning enhancement for sociology students in problematizing an orthodoxy of social action and social system perspectives, the latter including both consensus and conflict forms of sociology.

Goffman is not easily pigeon-holed within sociological perspectives. The liminal space that Goffman's sociology inhabited, alluded to in my first point above on his works' pedagogic value, was sketched in a self-avowed gloss:

My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitored arena of a face-to-face gathering [Goffman 1974: 8]

Yet we have to be circumspect about Goffman's pronouncements on perspective and methodology:

Implementing Goffman's perspective is difficult because (1) Goffman's assumptions about the conditions of social encounters are substantively appealing but lack explicit analytic categories delineating how the actor's perspective differs from that of the observer, and how both can be placed within the same conceptual frame; and (2) all of Goffman's descriptive statements are prematurely coded – that is, interpreted by the observer, infused with substance that must be taken for granted, and subsumed under abstract categories without telling the reader how all of this was recognized and accomplished. [Cicourel 1972: 241]

Goffman entertains an anomalous position as his studies of self and social processes might, at first reading, indicate a symbolic interactionist approach. However, his writings are suffused with a Durkheimian outlook, which owes much to his teacher William Lloyd Warner. In an interview, Goffman distanced himself from symbolic interaction:

I guess I'm as much what you call a symbolic interactionist as anyone else. But I'm also a structural functionalist in the traditional sense [Verhoeven 1993: 318]

Comparing his work with Herbert Blumer, Goffman thought 'my sociology is a much more traditional kind' [Verhoeven 1993: 320]. Indeed, Goffman's writings have a conservative, rather than a radical, take on social processes as rituals. Cicourel [1972] notes that Goffman had sophisticated notions of what constituted role, status and the definition of the situation. Nevertheless, these notions were not radically at odds with Parsons' [1951] differentiations. Cicourel [1972: 242] also notes that Goffman's 'reference to status as process', which could and would have served as a marker for Goffman's perspective, remains 'implicit'. Goffman's considerations of social interaction were original and distinct from the operationalization of interaction that would be popularized later [Collins, Collins 1973], though his studies were not a decisive break from extant sociological theorizing: Goffman's significant breakthrough was to identify the *domain* of interaction as a sociological topic. Yet as ground breaking as he was for sociology, it may be instructive instead to consider Goffman's contributions

as moving the crosshairs of the sociological gaze, rather than the nature of the gaze itself.

It is through the ‘limiting notions’ that were contemporaneously and retrospectively imposed upon Goffman’s writings, which set the terms for regarding Goffman as a particular kind of sociologist, that we have lost sight of other contributions. Issues of systematicity and generalization in Goffman’s work provide material for debate. In a rare reply to critics [Denzin and Keller 1981], Goffman can be read as distancing himself from the vagaries of sociological assessment:

One proclaims one’s membership in some named perspective, gives pious mention to its central texts, and announces that the writer under review is all off by failing to qualify for membership. A case of guilt by pigeonholing. As if a writer’s work is a unitary thing and can be all bad because he or she does not apparently subscribe to a particular doctrine, which doctrine, if subscribed to, would somehow make writings good. This vested interest in treating an individual’s diverse efforts as a succinctly characterizable corpus supports a crude fallacy. That in 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 to them hereafter [Goffman 1981b: 61]

In the Goffman literature, this fascinating admonition has been cited for different purposes [Abrams 2014; Smith 2011]. To avoid confusion with these, I shall clarify the importance of Goffman’s reply to this section and to the paper itself. First, as I said above, a number of Goffman’s works are used as complementary and comparative to Garfinkel. In this section, I am suggesting that the ‘limiting notions’ upon which comparisons are based obscure how Goffman and Garfinkel pursued very different forms of sociology, which have a *Gestalt* switch characteristic. As Goffman [Verhoeven 1993] himself admitted, his form of sociology was a study of the stipulative order of society; whereas Garfinkel, inspired by his readings of phenomenology, used sociology to study the constitutive order of settings. Second, this perspectival basis – what Garfinkel went on to call ‘asymmetric alternate technologies of analysis’ [Garfinkel, Wieder 1992] – is warrant to seek different aspects for comparison between Goffman and Garfinkel than those found in the Goffman literature. I suggest that coherent comparisons can be made by examining their respective work on *information*. Third, the systematicity debate in the Goffman literature has, until recently [Carlin 2022b], failed to address Goffman’s systematic contributions to a theory of information. This theory of information is a social theory of information, rather than a physicalist one, and is no less valuable for that. As Goffman’s social theory of information is developed and refined, he introduces cognitive and physicalist residua via his exposure to extant theories of information. However,

his theory of information is *sui generis* because his original formulations were not parasitic upon nor reducible to extant theories. To forestall my position being misconstrued, it is Goffman's contribution to the study of information and his pioneering of a sociological theory of information that is celebrated in this paper. Furthermore, I am suggesting that systematicity can be located in Goffman's theory of information.

INFORMATION AS A PROBLEM FOR SOCIOLOGY

A problem for sociology can be outlined by the example of a trip to the cinema. McHoul [2015] provides a vivid example of how theoretical accounts of everyday life can be discrepant from people's experience of everyday life. McHoul suggests that a cinema-goer might be more concerned with aspects such as whether the film was any good or not, whether the seat was comfortable with enough legroom, whether other patrons were making too much noise, than theoretical redescriptions of cinema or the politics of representation. 'Information' presents an analogous problem: how to define information, how to describe it, and how to theorize about it. Yet in interview accounts it is apparent that people engaged with social media, for example, have little difficulty describing everyday life activities as managing 'information' [Housley et al. 2014]. A problem for a sociology of information, it turns out, is whether it accommodates the accounts of society members.

Yet there are other organizational problems for the undeterred sociologist of information, which derive from the organization of the discipline itself. Following Lynch and Bogen [1997], these problems may be described as 'asociological' practices. We may formulate asociological practices as taking a non-explicative approach to information. I use 'non-explicative' to gloss a variety of (methodological) procedures. These include theorized accounts that do not accommodate *ab initio* the practical activities and practical competencies of those persons who have anything to do with information; which are, in consequence, decontextualized accounts removed from *in situ* occasions of information use; and discussions in which 'it is assumed that those reading it will *already* know what is being talked about' [Mair et al. 2016: 53–54; emphasis in original].

In these terms what we find in the literature are problems involving the unacknowledged acceptance of cognitive categories [e.g., Bilmes 2009]. Another problem is to assume that referring to an inchoate concept such as 'information age' [Murphy et al. 2021] has anything to say about the phenomenon of information. Historically and sociologically, this coinage does not stand scrutiny, whereby proponents of a current information age are embarrassed by careful accounts of

information [Black et al. 2007]. Other asociological practices include derogating the phenomenon via substitution, e.g., looking at the effects of disinformation and misinformation [Giglietto et al. 2019], rather than information; or information technology [Sassen 2002], rather than information; or information society, rather than information [Lash 2002]. The paradox of such asociological practices is that these do not transform information into a sociological phenomenon, only into a phenomenon that disciplinary sociology can handle.

STUDYING ‘INFORMATION’

Within the study of information, ‘the social’ – sometimes conflated with ‘the psychological’ – is just one of several paradigms, including behaviourism and cognitivism [Hjørland 2011]. That there are established bodies of knowledge, which have been found relevant to the study of information, is a reality check for the ‘theoretical imperialism’ of sociology [Strong 1979a]. Indeed, sociology – in particular, the sociology of organizations – is rebuked for failing to offer adequate theoretical analysis for information organizations [Meier 1965].

This is not to suggest that defining ‘information’ is straightforward. Even within the study of information, an unambiguous definition is difficult to discern; in part, this is due to a range of approaches and perspectives to information [Machlup, Mansfield 1983; Ramage, Chapman 2011]. Diversity is not confined to perspectives but to the ‘internal coherence’ of concepts: Attempts to realize unified theories [Brown 2014; Hofkirchner 2014; Ruesch, Bateson 1951] are subject to what Gilbert Ryle [1966] called ‘category-mistakes’ *ab initio*, conceptual confusions built on top of another. Not only are the discipline-specific programs² that are subject to proposed unification logically incompatible, the concepts through which unification is to be achieved³ are also internally diverse. Conceptual confusions are exacerbated when ‘discontinuities in understanding which make it difficult to understand whether the “information” being spoken of in different contexts is in any way “the same thing”, or at least “the same sort of thing”; and if not, in what way – if any – the different meanings of information related to one another’ [Robinson, Bawden 2014: 122].⁴

² ‘[P]sychiatric, psychological, and anthropological concepts have been synthesized with theories derived from cybernetics and communication engineering’ [Ruesch, Bateson 1951: 14]

³ ‘Information’, for Hofkirchner [2014]; ‘communication’, which rivals information, for Ruesch and Bateson [1951]; ‘the social’, which presupposes information, for Brown [2014].

⁴ For considerations of concept use between and within disciplines see Carlin and Kim [2021].

It is important to remember that 'information' is an ordinary word in language, with a historicity [Rose 1960] and its own grammar [Watson, Carlin 2012]. The risks involved with using ordinary words as technical concepts are manifold: 'it has been treated as a primitive concept, introduced where the need is felt without explanation or examination of its character or credentials. As is often the case with unanalyzed concepts used in an ad hoc fashion, the term has been made to cover a wide range of common-sense meanings, with predictable ambiguities' [Becker 1960: 32]. Although Becker was here discussing the notion of 'commitment', the overlaps with the situation for information as a concept are striking. Becker's observation may have been unpopular within sociology yet the analytic ramifications of conceptual analysis for sociology [Coulter 1995a] and for the study of information beyond sociology [Coulter 1995b] are profound. As Rose [1960] suggests, the word 'information' already carries ordinary determinations that prefigure technical appropriations of the word. Crucially, these vernacular meanings remain operative despite its technical specifications.

While it is straightforward to regard forms of sociology that treat game theory as a resource [e.g., Goffman 1969] as pressing information theory into the service of sociology, discussions of secrecy that pre-dated game theory demonstrate how information-theoretic models were not requisites for sociological conceptualizations of information. One of the most famous of these, perhaps, is Simmel [1906]. A sociology of information can be 'read into' Simmel's work, such as its connections with his theory of dyads and triads [Wolff 1950] – yet it is discerned by the reader but not expressed by Simmel himself. Furthermore, it is notable that sociology was not subsuming information theory; rather, sociologists were trading upon information theory and information-related phenomena as examples to justify their conceptualizations [e.g., see Glaser, Strauss 1964].

Peter Berger [1963] identified a distinction between people and information, not just in terms of information but in the *ownership* of information. Berger's example is with criminologists' organization of 'valuable information about processes of crime' [Berger 1963: 13], which would be useful to both organized criminals and the police services, yet it was only the police who consulted criminologists. This discrepancy 'has nothing to do with the character of the information itself' [Berger 1963: 13] but is related to extraneous factors.

The distinction that Berger identified had already been collapsed by Goffman [1952, 1953, 1956, 1959] in his iterations of a theory of social information. Goffman [1963b] published *Stigma* in the same year; hence, Berger [1963] missed perhaps the most *sociologically* coherent of Goffman's treatments of the ownership of information – distinguishing between 'the own' and 'the wise'.

The wise were those people who are aware of a particular (stigmatizing) secret, and everyone else, who Goffman called ‘the own’, who were not party to and were excluded from the secret by the wise. This generalizable discrimination of access to information is one of the defining features in a social theory of information: It is much more formal sociological than the substantive view of his work on secret information [Goffman 1969]. During fieldwork for what would become *Asylums* [Goffman 1961], Goffman had been sensitized to the interdisciplinary issue of classification – in terms of how psychiatry and sociology talk about people and their behaviours, and how these are often misaligned. Goffman topicalized this disciplinary difference [Goffman 1957] and engaged with it during preliminary presentations [Goffman 1958]; these topicalizations and engagements find expression within his book [Goffman 1961]. People’s misalignments and disciplinary distinctions were related to the possession and description of *information*.

Furthermore, given that Goffman articulated contours of social information so explicitly, it is all the more remarkable that ‘the social’ in information is cited and credited to Gregory Bateson [1972]. Bateson’s pithy summary of information – ‘a difference that makes a difference’ – provides a short, useful ‘soundbite’ as cover for an enormous literature dealing with information.⁵ First, however, on careful reading of Bateson it becomes clear that this was not actually a definition of information in the way social scientists have assumed. Second, Bateson’s use of the word ‘information’ throughout his work was in any case *internally* inconsistent and resistant to isolation as a definable term. Third, Bateson relies upon a variety of theoretical perspectives, including an information processing model – information within someone’s ‘head’ – inconsistent with the non-psychological claims of sociological programs [Durkheim 1982].

Goffman’s work on information is historically important for a sociology of information because it is perspicuously tied to information. The reading of Simmel’s paper cited above as a sociology of information is tendentiously expressed in Marx and Muschert [2008]. Whereas the aforementioned studies by Simmel, Glaser and Strauss, and others may be subject to new readings in informational terms, enfolding these within a sociology of information is a reconstruction.

The importance of Goffman’s work on information is crucial also in the light of subsequent developments. Although I suggest that Goffman’s arguments on information were cumulative and systematic, it is to be noted that the majority

⁵ Bateson’s apothegm on information appeared in a paper from 1969, which was included in his 1972 collection. However, Goffman’s writings on information as a topic were by this time available.

of Goffman's analyses of information prefigure Bateson's [1972] comments. Goffman addresses but moves beyond theories of information exchange, with which Brown [2014] persists. Hofkirchner's [2014] caveat – social information 'within the perspective of a unified theory of information' – is a rudimentary but cynical 'let it pass' procedure [Garfinkel 1967], which absolves him from examining 'social information'. This caveat allows him to reside in the discredited distinction between objective 'hard' and subjective 'soft' sciences (*sic*) while remaining within a self-confirming citation firmament that ignores Goffman's delineation of social information and Garfinkel's [2008] requirements for such theorizing.

GOFFMAN AND GARFINKEL: INFORMATION AS A NEW CRITERION FOR EVALUATION

Goffman and Garfinkel had a great deal in common in terms of their instituting domains for investigation, and topics for inquiry. Yet their commonalities should be caveated and qualified. For instance, the problematic assumption – based upon a titular reading of *Forms of talk* – that Goffman took the 'linguistic turn' in sociology. Another issue is pedagogic: In textbook accounts, Goffman and Garfinkel are frequently positioned proximate to one another, often with Garfinkel following Goffman; and such proximate positioning may give the misleading impression that Goffman and Garfinkel shared analytic affinities – as though Garfinkel was in some way an extension of Goffman's form of sociology, or that they both articulated forms of 'microsociology' [Smith 2003].

While distinctions between them may be subtle, these are fundamental and are flattened in secondary accounts. The work of both Garfinkel and Goffman is traduced and pedagogically impoverished through the reliance of secondary sources and, furthermore, the authoritative imprimatur of some secondary sources exacerbates this impoverishment. *Referencing* Goffman within a literature review that prefaces an ethnomethodological study is not a problem *per se* – after all, contextualizing the study of phenomena constitutes 'scholarship'. Using Goffman's work to set the *terms of reference* of an ethnomethodological study does present a problem, however, as the analyst is attempting to force logically incompatible ways of working together [Carlin, Slack, Moutinho 2022; Watson 1992].

In demonstrating the dangers of relying upon secondary sources, Czyżewski [1989, 1994] itemizes how secondary literature on ethnomethodology departs from Garfinkel, in terms of cognitivism, and on the meaning and use of the term 'reflexivity'. Connecting Garfinkel with 'constructionism' [Rawls, Whitehead,

Duck 2020, *passim*.] is another case in point and this is disjunctive with Garfinkel's own comments on the matter: Garfinkel was concerned to clarify that a fundamental distinction between his work and others – and particularly Goffman's – ran along a 'fault line' *vis-à-vis* the notion of construction [Wiley 2019]. Although Goffman too went on to distance himself from constructionism [Verhoeven 1993], the episodic analysis of everyday life that Garfinkel [1967: 166–167] had identified in Goffman's work characterized constructionist approaches.

Garfinkel's observations were informed by phenomenology and, of significance, may relate to a possible disjuncture between himself and Goffman. *Stigma* was planned as a co-authored volume: Goffman had a book contract with the publisher Prentice-Hall and Garfinkel was scheduled to place his study of Agnes alongside Goffman's shorter essays. Garfinkel decided not to continue, possibly fearing that the Agnes study would be used as yet another case of stigma, supporting Goffman's "'just-so" stories' [Garfinkel et al. 1981: 136].

Among other problematics with comparing Goffman and Garfinkel has been treating Garfinkel as a synecdoche for ethnomethodology. This conflates disjunctive approaches – to 'passing' and discrediting information from *Stigma* [Goffman 1963b] or passages on 'impression management' in *The presentation of self in everyday life* [Goffman 1959] – with Garfinkel's [1967: 116–185] study of 'Agnes', the intersexed person. A 'synecdochic' approach allows Smith [2003] to move from talking 'about Garfinkel' to talking 'about ethnomethodology'. Thus endowed, Smith cites Cicourel [1972] among the 'Sustained and detailed criticism of Goffman's work', which reifies Cicourel's chapter as a critique of Goffman rather than an engagement with what had then become basic concepts within sociology, of which Goffman provided an instantiation.

The understandable conflation of Garfinkel and ethnomethodology creates a further problematic: that is, the subordinate status of Garfinkel's considerations of information, which are (naturally) overshadowed by ethnomethodology. Without wishing to overstate this claim, much of Garfinkel's writings on ethnomethodology – both his conceptual and empirical work – concern information.⁶ The synecdochic approach disguises the extent that *Garfinkel's* writings on ethnomethodology – though not ethnomethodology *per se* – constitute a conspectus toward a sociology of information.

⁶ As an example of overclaiming, the blurb on the jacket cover of *Toward a sociological theory of information* [Garfinkel 2008] incorrectly suggests that Garfinkel produces a theory of information. As argued elsewhere [Carlin 2022b], this is not the case at all. Garfinkel outlines the requirements for an adequate theory of information, rather than providing a theory himself.

Surface similarities between the sociologies of Goffman and Garfinkel presented in secondary sources gloss over fundamental differences. These differences may be encapsulated by saying that, while the interaction order may have been submerged in orthodox professional sociology, Goffman's form of sociology was prosecuted in the same terms as professional sociology. To quote from Graham Button [1991: 4], Goffman's writings 'may challenge existing bodies of thought, but they do not challenge the very foundational act of theorising'; indeed, 'the methodological foundations ... remain[ed] intact'. Goffman's sociology would co-exist with sociologies of the self and agency, distinct from the variegated body of theories that constituted symbolic interactionism; and it would become part of a contrast pair to highlight a distinction between micro and macro forms of sociology.

INFLUENCE AND INFLUENCES

Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel both changed the sociological 'landscape', independently from the powerful intellectual legacies of their teachers. For Goffman, this was an anthropological attitude from W. Lloyd Warner. Goffman's sociology was appreciative of Durkheim; steeped in the Pragmatism of American Sociology at the University of Chicago, his works are not reducible to the influence of his teachers [Smith 2022]. Garfinkel did not share this intellectual background [Rawls 2013].

The intellectual legacies left by Garfinkel and Goffman are diffuse. For one thing, some of Garfinkel's ideas are smuggled into sociological orthodoxy without acknowledgement. This both indexes the 'seeming domestication of ethnomethodology as a sociological "speciality"' [Zimmerman 1987: 20] and smooths the accommodation of Garfinkel's work into mainstream sociology, which was not just resistant to but actively hostile towards ethnomethodology [Coleman 1968; Coser 1975; Goldthorpe 1973; Gouldner 1970]. Without citation, Garfinkel's ideas can then be appropriated and repackaged for an appreciative audience – an irony indeed.⁷

For another, it is difficult to identify a definitive legacy from Goffman.⁸ Cavan's [1966] discussion of public bars and Strong's [1979b] analysis of clinics

⁷ See Pollner [1991]. A different take was provided by Wes Sharrock in his acceptance speech for the ASA Lifetime Achievement Award: 'It has been to ethnomethodology's credit that the subjects we've studied in the fields of science and technology thought [that] ethnomethodology was sociology' [quoted in Macbeth 2013: 147].

⁸ Leib's [2017: 190] claim 'While there is an abundance of work on Michel Foucault, not only within philosophy but in sociology as well, there is comparatively little work on sociologist Erving

perhaps remain the clearest examples of trying to follow through upon Goffman's work. In the case of Goffman, then, we note an imbalance between coverage and comment on Goffman's work, with work that actually takes Goffman's conceptual and theoretical positions forward.⁹ Jaworski [2021: 406] claims that a study by one of Goffman's former students [Marx 2016] shows that Marx is the 'true heir' of Goffman on information. Marx cites Goffman's work throughout, acknowledging his influence and using quotes from Goffman as epigrams to chapters. Do Goffman scholars really accept that these tokens of affiliation amount to serious analytic engagement with Goffman's work?¹⁰ Paradoxically, writers of studies that do exhibit a Goffmanian sensibility – both produced by former students – distance themselves from Goffman's influence and involvement, acknowledging Garfinkel instead [Sacks 1972; Sudnow 1967].

Greg Smith [2006: 31] suggests that accounting for the influences upon Goffman's teachers provides a 'surer method of tracking formative influences' of Goffman himself. Garfinkel was bequeathed a more sociological outlook from Talcott Parsons. Garfinkel's puzzles with his teacher's view of society [Parsons 1937] led to a lifelong engagement with phenomenologically inspired approaches. Both Goffman and Garfinkel were ambivalent about tracing intellectual lineages. Goffman was diffident about 'acknowledging intellectual indebtedness' [Smith 1989: 20], whereas Garfinkel was dismissive of what he called a 'pedagogic interest' in intellectual forbears. D. Lawrence Wieder [Wieder et al. 2010: 135] draws attention to Garfinkel's practice of 'ransacking' others' work. Garfinkel was famous for borrowing from other scholars, transforming their notions to suit his purposes. A classic example of this is 'the documentary method of interpretation', which he took from Karl Mannheim [1966]: Garfinkel's use of the term in no way coheres with Mannheim's original version. Likewise, he borrowed from Aron Gurwitsch, Edmund Husserl and Felix Kaufmann, transforming concepts in pursuit of adequate terminology to account for members' practices.

Goffman in either discipline' is absurd and undermined further by looking at other disciplines, e.g. linguistics. There we find the influence of Goffman's information concepts, such as impression management, or information preserve, which is reformulated as 'territory of information' [Kamio 1997].

⁹ For remarkable exceptions, see Gastaldo [2002] and Smith [2022], both of which advance (rather than merely cite) Goffman's work. For a genuine advance upon what we already know about Goffman and his activities, see Winkin (2022).

¹⁰ Indeed, what we may be observing – in terms of scholarship – is a situation along the lines suggested by Watson [2021]. Is Goffman's way of working being suffocated by his most fervent advocates?

INFORMATION OR COMMUNICATION?

Even though Goffman's examples are pellucid and meticulously described, they remain abstractions of concrete practices. While Goffman [1953, 1983a] instated 'the interaction order' as a topic for sociological inquiry, Garfinkel's 'praxeological order' could not be accommodated by sociology. To attenuate their contributions, Goffman established a new topic for sociology; Garfinkel established a new form of sociology. An axis on this can be provided through consideration of communication theory and information theory.

Claude Shannon elaborated upon experiments performed at his workplace and formulated 'information theory' [Shannon, Weaver 1949]. Shannon's innovative work marked the post-War paradigm. In its physicalist conception Shannon's information theory was not a subsection of communication theory [Cover, Thomas 2006], and his theory was intercalated within communication theory inappropriately [Bar-Hillel, Carnap 1953]. One source of this confusion was the essay by Warren Weaver that precedes Shannon's formulation of information theory – readers who make it past Weaver's essay discover that Shannon is not addressing communication theory at all [Ritchie 1986: 280].

The crucial point for Goffman was that 'communication' glosses over *social* information. Communication fails to capture the different forms of information that are available to people during face-to-face interactions. A famous example, of course, was Goffman's distinction between 'expressions given' and 'expressions given off'. As such, for Goffman, communication was a reductive term in comparison with information.

One of Garfinkel's achievements was to problematize the vocabulary of sociology. Essentially, Garfinkel did not try to hijack ordinary terms, but nor did he wish to use discipline-specific terms which falsified the phenomena he was attempting to describe. In contrast, Goffman adapted extant models that served as departures for him to elaborate upon phenomena being described for sociology for the very first time. In prosecution of this task, he enlisted a model from outside both sociology and the study of information [Saussure 1916]. However, Goffman's articulation of 'social information' is not reducible either to Saussure or to studies of information, which did not capture the phenomenon that Goffman wished to discuss. As such, Goffman's development of information theory was *sui generis*, independent from prior literature and independent from context.

SYSTEMATICITY

Greg Smith is concerned by critiques of systematicity within Goffman's work:

it would be a mistake to suppose that Goffman's ideas about interaction did not cumulate or lacked a systematic basis. Certain terms and themes recur throughout Goffman's writings. In these terms and themes we can locate the central topics and preoccupations of Goffman's sociology of the interaction order [Smith 2006: 33]

I suggest that Goffman's considerations of information within and across his works constitute a systematic treatment [Carlin 2022b]. 'Systematicity' is taken as a criterial assessment of sociologists and there has been debate about Goffman as a systematic sociologist [Giddens 1988; Maseda 2017; Scott 2022; Smith 1989, 2006]. An informational approach to Goffman's studies suggests another line of coherence throughout his works. Goffman's work is cumulative – just not in the sense that advocates [e.g., Williams 1988] suggest.

An eligible point for comparison between Goffman and Garfinkel is *information*. Information is a thematic continuity throughout their works. Goffman's most obvious contribution to the study of information is *Strategic interaction*. However, I suggest that Goffman insufflates his writings with considerations of information, which are original, sociological, and have hitherto escaped scrutiny. Likewise, Garfinkel's most obvious contribution to the study of information is *Towards a sociological theory of information* [Garfinkel 2008], a collection of memos which, when taken together, constituted a complete manuscript. Yves Winkin found a manuscript written by Garfinkel, with the title *Notes Toward a sociological theory of information* – being Memo #3 of the Organizational Behavior Project at Princeton University. The manuscript was in Goffman's old office at the Department of Anthropology, located in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Winkin recognized the significance of the document; he sent it to Rod Watson, who forwarded it to Anne Rawls, Garfinkel's literary executor, with a covering letter of attestation to its provenance. Rawls realized that Memos #1 and #2 were in the Garfinkel Archive at Newburyport, and these Memos were published together as *Toward a sociological theory of information*. This book is attracting attention as an item in Garfinkel's corpus of work; it has yet, however, to achieve widespread penetration in ethnomethodology or sociology.

Attention to the notion of 'information' marks a commonality between Goffman and Garfinkel. Their discussions of information were contemporaneous. Information insufflates Goffman's writings, yet is nowhere considered as a thematic concern throughout his career. Similarly, Garfinkel's discussions of

information have gone unrecognized; yet this is not only due to the discovery and recent publication of missing manuscripts [Garfinkel 2008]. I suggest that throughout the development of ethnomethodology, members' information practices have received less attention than was evident within Garfinkel's own work.

CONCLUSION

This paper is a recommendation to return to Erving Goffman's original writings. Reading Goffman is exciting and enlightening at any stage of one's career: 'Goffman's writings appeal to both beginners and experts alike. In them a deceptively transparent exterior surrounds a complex core, access to which becomes a test of the reader's own sociological sophistication' [Smith 1999: 4]. Although engagement with the range of debates and discussions in the secondary literature assists in accessing the complex core of Goffman's work that Smith mentions, these sources are not substitutes for reading Goffman. In addition, as discussed above, some contributions to the secondary literature are compromised by instructed readings of Goffman at the expense of rival versions, or contain distortions of Goffman, or misrepresent others' arguments and views on Goffman [Carlin 2022a].

Goffman and Garfinkel both worked on information as a *topic for analysis* continuously and contemporaneously. Without archive evidence to corroborate precisely when they became aware of each other's work on information,¹¹ I suggest that they were considering information in parallel, not necessarily in full knowledge of each other's 1952–1953 work. In sociology, discipline sanctioned comparisons fail to include *information* as a criterion for assessment. In the case of Garfinkel, one of the reasons that information has not been taken up is the relatively recent discovery of his information memos, and subsequent assembly and publication [Garfinkel 2008]. Also, perhaps, taking ethnomethodology as a respecification of the sociology of knowledge has overshadowed ethnomethodology both as an engagement with information and as a sociology of information.

Why Goffman and information has not occasioned further investigation is more puzzling, as information is a dominant theme throughout Goffman's work. However, it remains unacknowledged. Game theory within *Strategic interaction* has attracted attention [Jaworski 2021, 2022; Louch 1966]. Game theory was

¹¹ I concur with Smith [2003: 278–279] that citations and references provide only speculative rather than definitive readings. To quote Schegloff [1988: 133] on Goffman's use of invented data, 'this is conjectural at best, and wrong at worst'.

a variant information theory [Neumann, Morgenstern 1944] yet, beyond *Strategic interaction* and *The presentation of self in everyday life* [Gibson 2014], Goffman's own contributions to studies of information have been overlooked. Limiting Goffman's contribution to a 'sociology of information control' [Jaworski 2021] does not make a sociology of information more specific or more focused; rather, it traduces and derogates Goffman's originality in writing about information.

In the Introduction I listed just some of Goffman's conceptual contributions and distinctions that have influenced sociology and sociologists for decades. Some of these, such as civil inattention and impression management, are dependent not only on Goffman's theories of self but also his theory of social information. Others, such as stigma and the lineaments of total institutions, are likewise dependent on Goffman's theories of self as well as his observations on who uses information and among whom information is shared. It is my contention that among Goffman's contributions to sociology what has so far been overlooked are his cumulative and systematic approaches to information throughout his works. Furthermore, that Goffman's systematicity could form a more adequate basis for a sociology of information than existing, non-explicative approaches to substantive topics such as information overload, information society, and information technology.

'Systematicity' is a password in sociology. It falls into the same basket of methodological assessment terms such as 'generalizability', 'reliability', and 'validity'. Garfinkel noted that the occurrence of particular passwords, such as 'interaction', 'seems to set men off to the task of tracing stimulus-response patterns' [Garfinkel 2006: 179]. Likewise, it is regrettable that disciplinary concerns for systematicity as system building have focused across Goffman's work as a whole rather than at individual items of his corpus, which is where it may be found. *Asylums* [1961], *Behavior in public places* [1963a], *Gender advertisements* [1979] and most perspicuously perhaps *Strategic interaction* [1969], for instance, are each self-contained and *internally* systematic.

Beyond this, of course, we note that 'systematicity' is not restricted to the building of a system. My core suggestion with this paper is that 'systematicity' is found in Goffman's work and that this is locatable when he discusses 'information'. Goffman's writings on information are elaborated progressively within each of his books. While Goffman introduces a new domain of study for sociology, I suggest that this domain encompasses people dealing with social information. 'Social information' is a gloss for a wide variety of categories. In producing a theory of social information, Goffman explores and delimits forms of social information within his books. Hence, the systematicity within and across his works.

Can sociology move beyond what Winch [1974] referred to, *mutatis mutandis*, as the 'limiting notions' of substantive categories? Can we instate a sociology of information in its own terms, rather than seek acceptability within the discipline by attaching information to existing conceptual apparatus, e.g., information control, information society, and thus mischaracterize the phenomenon as it is encountered by people in the world? Both Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel are catalysers of this objective because they do treat information in its own terms as well as delimiting activities such as information control, information sharing and withholding information. Furthermore, in treating information as a topic in its own right, both Goffman and Garfinkel set precedents for a broader acceptance of information in its own terms within the discipline itself.

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SYSTEMATYCZNA SOCJOLOGIA INFORMACJI ERVINGA GOFFMANA

Abstrakt

W stulecie urodzin Ervinga Goffmana artykuł ten ma na celu przyjrzenie się jego pionierskim pracom z zakresu socjologii informacji. Goffman stworzył teorię informacji *sui generis*, która była niezależna od już istniejących studiów nad informacją. Rozważania Goffmana dotyczące informacji są powszechnie obecne w jego pracach. Są one systematyczne w tym sensie, że rozwijają się i można zauważyć ich postęp we wszystkich jego dziełach. Jednakże, jego wkład w rozważania dotyczące informacji są dopiero odkrywane. Dotychczas istniejące opracowania prac Goffmana nie przykładały należytej uwagi i nie doceniały jego systematycznego ujęcia informacji. Informacja była tematem dociekań Goffmana w tym samym czasie jak Harolda Garfinkla. Informacja i systematyczne studia nad informacją są wskazywane jako te, które pozwalają na ustalenie powiązań i różnic pomiędzy Goffmanem i Garfinklem.

Słowa kluczowe: Erving Goffman, Harold Garfinkel, informacja, perspektywy socjologiczne, socjologia informacji, systematyczność