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THE THEORY-METHOD-LINK IN ERVING GOFFMAN'S SOCIOLOGY OF THE INTERACTION ORDER

Abstract

Social crises draw attention to the fragility and temporary nature of everyday life. This not only triggers irritations, uncertainties and fears among the actors but also brings to light the rules of social order that have hitherto quietly and dutifully performed their services behind their backs. In particular, the restrictions on physical co-presence during the Corona pandemic have sparked renewed interest in the relevance and currency of the interactional order observed and described by Erving Goffman. What happens to the rituals of the interaction order when social encounters are less and less restricted to physical co-presence? And what are the implications of these changes for the self in the age of digital presence? Drawing on George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley on the one hand and ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation on the other, a theoretical and methodological cornerstone of Goffmanian sociology is presented and discussed. It is argued that the indissoluble links between specific theoretical assumptions and a particular conception and practice of empirical research are crucial for the continuing relevance of Goffman's interaction order, not least for the study of social action in digital media.

Keywords: George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, fieldwork, ethnography, participant observation, conceptual constructivism, mediated communication, digital media

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INTRODUCTION

Erving Goffman's perspective and working style, and his terms and concepts focus on face-to-face situations in which the actors meet and interact in physical co-presence. Although mediated communication, for example the exchange of letters and telephone calls, advertisements in magazines and radio broadcasts, play an important role, face-to-face situations constitute and remain the basic fundament for the analyses of the interaction order. Goffman died too early and could not have foreseen the developments and changes in social communication brought about by the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies, and by the massive uptake of new interpersonal media at the end of the 20th century. Within a few decades, new digital devices have entered everyday communication, opening up new possibilities for actors to present themselves and perceive others. But what happens to the rules and rituals of the interaction order when social encounters are less and less limited to physical co-presence? What are the new challenges for actors who are notoriously confronted with social situations anyway, and who now must also deal with the omnipresent mediated communication? What are the repercussions of these shifts on the self in the age of digital presence? Is the scope of the interaction order shifting, expanding or narrowing? Are new concepts necessary for the social sciences to analyse and to describe social action in everyday life beyond the Goffmanian perspective and repertoire? Such questions, which made the status of the interaction order a subject of discussion started to arise in the mid-1990s. Since then, the research has focused on two aspects. Firstly, the validity and the potential of Goffman's classical metaphors and analogies, terms and concepts, in order to describe and to typify social situations in the age of digitally mediated communication. And secondly, whether and to what extent Goffman's program should be rethought in regard to the methodological challenges for further ethnographic research, as well as for the analysis of data from mediated settings.

Crises like the Corona pandemic are known to uncover the fragility and temporary nature of everyday life. This not only triggers irritations, uncertainties, and fears in the actors, but also brings to light something which has hitherto quietly and obediently performed its services behind their backs: the set of rules of "a world taken for granted" [Schutz 1964] which we and others have established around us, and in which we can move blindly like within our own four walls. In particular, the restrictions on physical co-presence during the Corona pandemic and the shift of many social occasions to digital media have sparked increased interest in the relevance and currency of the interactional order described by

Goffman. Against this background, the article discusses (1.) George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley on the one hand (2.) and ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation on the other hand (3.) a theoretical and methodological cornerstone of Goffman's sociology and thus at the same time two inseparable main sources for the development and actuality of the interaction order. It is argued that the theory-method-link, that is, the indissoluble coupling of specific theoretical assumptions and a particular conception and practice of empirical research, is crucial for the continuing relevance of Goffman's sociology of the interaction order, not least for the study of social action in digital media (4.).

THEORETICAL BASES: GOFFMAN AS A MEAD-COOLEY MERGER

Goffman's theoretical influences are manifold and not easy to survey. He himself has contributed much to this unclear trail by providing only sparse references. Furthermore, Goffman did not engage in deep theoretical arguments with 'his' authors, nor did he participate in the debates that took place among them or about them. Rather, he treated the authors who were important to him as quarries from which he picked up and further developed whatever suggestions, observations, and reflections fit within the particular state of his own research and theoretical program. While his familiarity with the classic works of Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel is well documented through notes and quotations, reconstructing the influences from his closer academic environment is more difficult. When Goffman studied in Chicago between 1945 and 1958, the founding fathers and first teachers of the Chicago School of Sociology were already emeritus or deceased, and the generational shift from the first 'classical' to what later became known as the Second Chicago School of Sociology was in full swing. Moreover, he vehemently refused to be assigned to the new label of symbolic interactionism, which he saw as motivated more by science policy than by content.[1]

But as unique as Goffman's position within sociology may seem today, and as intricate as the web of traditions from which he comes is, in one of his few interviews he names the two reference authors central to him in the same breath:

> Coming from Chicago, there was the tradition of George Herbert Mead to provide the so-cial psychological underpinning or background for any study. From there one could go in all kinds of directions. […] That is, Mead was very smart fellow. You can learn a lot from

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[1] "I always felt that the introduction of the term, symbolic interactionism, as a label of some sort of group was a response of people to tendencies in sociology to fracture and fragment and, for some of the persons in the fragments to make a 'club' of their profession. So I've never treated the label very seriously. I don't think it applies very much" [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 318].

reading his books. At least get a lot of leads – what are now called sensitizing concepts, directions for inquiry. Cooley, as far as I was concerned, was very significant in all this too. Charles Horton Cooley, and he would be called a symbolic interactionist now, but the name wasn't around when he wrote. He is very, very important [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 318, 336].

From the classical Chicago School line of tradition, the social psychological approaches of Mead and Cooley informed Goffman's early studies, which laid the foundations for the sociology of the interactional order; they are of hardly overestimable importance both because of their unmistakable theoretical proximity and because of their very own emphases. [Schubert 2006; Wiley 2011].

Taken on their own, and especially through their connections and entanglements, Mead and Goffman are highly compatible and extremely fruitful sources of impetus for social scientific thought and research. Their effects, which emanated from their common tradition and continue to emerge from it, are so profound and manifold that they can only be touched upon here. First and foremost is their relevance to the sociological concept of role. Mead's concepts of role-taking and role-playing, as well as the metaphors introduced by Goffman of the theatre and the stage, of actors and their audiences, and especially his concept of role-distance, were taken up by post-war sociology with its debates on the alienating significance of social roles.

At the same time, Mead and Goffman advanced to become powerful connectors of what is now called the interpretive paradigm of sociology [Wilson 1970]. For the paradigm, the evolutionary and interaction theory approach, which goes back to Mead and Cooley and was continued by Goffman, with its insight into the constitution of interaction structures through mutual reflection of the actors, became the supporting pillar. Especially for Berger and Luckmann's new sociology of knowledge, which is at the centre of the paradigm, Mead and Goffman became reference authors with the same relevance at three points. First, when individuals internalize a social order as a subjective reality in their primary and secondary socialization [Berger, Luckmann 1966: 149–182]; second, when Mead's anthropological and action-theoretical oriented social psychology is fundamental for the account of the primary socialization phase; third, when Goffman's concept of identity becomes essential for the description of secondary socialization. Subsequently, Thomas Luckmann draws on Mead in the same way as on Goffman for his sociological understanding of personal identity and for his analysis of communicative genres. The interpretive paradigm is based on the idea that individuals and societies can process and cope with the openness and ambiguity of their identities and other recurring problems only

socially and communicatively, in competitive and cooperative interactions. This idea also guides the theoretical and empirical continuations of the New Sociology of Knowledge [Raab 2019; Knoblauch 2020].

MIND, SELF AND SOCIETY ARE TRIPLETS

At the core of Mead's theory of socialization and identity are two complementary considerations: the idea of an indissoluble interplay in the development of the individual and society, and the anthropological concept of 'role taking' to describe the development of mind. First and foremost, Mead is concerned with showing that mind, self, and society are not substances but complexly interwoven, dynamic processes that can only be analytically distinguished from one another and are open to further development. This consideration is seminal for Goffman. His investigations emerge from the tension between social situations and the self, and they follow Mead in that for the analysis of these interactions "the whole (society) is prior to the part (the individual), not the part to the whole; and the part is explained in terms of the whole, not the whole in terms of the part or parts" [Mead 1943: 7]. Goffman closely follows Mead, stating that his starting point is "not the individual and his psychology [...], but rather the syntactical relations among the acts of different persons mutually present to one another" [Goffman 1967: 2]. The sociology of the interaction order, as Goffman's oft-quoted pronouncement has it, is interested not in "men and their moments. Rather moments and their men" [Goffman 1967: 2]. Consequently, "it might be better to start from outside the individual and work in than to start inside the individual and work out" [Goffman 1959: 50, Fn. 2]. Mead's strong interest in distinguishing himself from Cooley's introspective approach makes him appear as a detached observer of the human mind. But Goffman's investigations penetrate much less deeply, even though later studies such as *Frame analysis* raise the problem of the reality status of everyday experiences and place Alfred Schutz and phenomenology ahead of psychology. Goffman's interest is rather that literally everything that happens or does not happen in social situations has immediate repercussions on what he conceives as the self of an individual.

This understanding, however, again bears the unmistakable traits of Mead – and also of Cooley. For Mead's concept of the self as a tension between 'I' and 'Me', like Cooley's famous expression of the 'looking-glass self', is directed against the notion of the self as a stable inner core of being, whether given by nature or capable of being shaped autonomously by the individual. Rather, they describe identity as a cognitive structure that is formed in social contexts of

coordination, cooperation, and communication in which an individual constantly interacts with his or her social environment so that a self and its social situations develop and change interdependently. In short, Mead's *Mind, self and society* does not describe a progression, but rather a simultaneous chord, or as Cooley put it more connectively for Goffman: "self and society are twin-born" [Cooley 1909: 5].

The key to understanding the indissoluble connection in the development of the individual and society is Mead's anthropological concept of role taking. The capacity of 'taking the role of the other' means being aware of the possible attitudes and reactions of social others to one's own actions. By developing and refining this ability in the process of one's socialization, an individual can be subject and object at the same time, and shared situational determinations and coordinated actions become possible. This is why Mead sums up: "We must be others if we are to be ourselves" [Mead 1925: 276]. Goffman appropriates this view only to immediately expand upon it:

> George Herbert Mead must be our guide. What the individual is for himself is not something that he invented. It is what his significant others have come to see he should be, what they have come to treat him as being, and what, in consequence, he must treat himself as being if he is to deal with their dealings with him [Goffman 1971: 327].

Goffman's understanding of identity as a "simultaneous multiplicity of selves" [Goffman 1963a: 63, 72] derived from this central idea not only leads him to his famous conceptual distinction between role-playing and role-distance but also forms the basis for his tripartite typology of identity. In this typology, 'social identity' is based on the attributions and categorical assignments of social others. It draws on characteristics and traits that are immediately perceived or anticipated in an individual and are assumed to remain stable across different social situations, such as gender, age, ethnicity, and social milieu. Contrary to what the term suggests, the second type of identity is also based on social attributions and identifications.[2]

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[2]   The perception of these characteristics puts us in a position to categorize a stranger at first glance and anticipate his qualities. Of course, in the course of focused interaction, these instant attributions of qualities usually turn out to require correction, and in extreme cases, prove to be completely wrong. Goffman makes a fine-grained distinction between 'virtual social identity', which rests on such stereotypical attributions made in the moment, and 'actual social identity', which is comprised of those qualities that in fact belong to a person. This differentiation also marks a critical discrepancy: The individual in question "possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated," which excludes him from being fully accepted socially as a normal person [Goffman 1963b: 15].

However, in contrast to social identity, which allows an individual to be absorbed into larger groups, 'personal identity' is based on the specific combination of the characteristics of an individual, as it results from his or her name, from aspects of his or her specific physical appearance, and from his or her biography. Whereas social identity and personal identity are based on external attributions, Goffman focuses with his third type on the subjective and reflexive parts of identity. For the type 'ego-identity' he considers the intimate, emotional attachment of individuals to their self. For this he adds Mead's concept of 'role taking' to Cooley's concept of the 'looking-glass self':

> A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. […] We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind [Cooley 1902: 152f.].

WITH COOLEY BEYOND MEED – AND BEYOND BOTH

Against this background, Goffman goes beyond Mead at no less than three theoretical points. For this, he firstly refers to Cooley before he finally leaves both of his inspirers behind him.

The first theoretical point is so to speak the deepest anchor of the sociology of interaction order. It is to be found where, "as Cooley argued, the self-regarding sentiments such as pride and shame will be involved" [Goffman 1971: 341; Scheff 2013]. In fact, the two feelings that deeply affect the self, run like a thread through Goffman's oeuvre, together with the sense of honour, dignity and serenity on the one hand, and the fear of embarrassment, disrespect, anger and self-hatred on the other. Habitual imprints and biographical experiences played a part in Goffman's sensitivity to positive and negative emotions associated with situations of social recognition and with social status passages within the white American middle class. But Cooley provides the theoretically relevant reference for the investigation of the interaction order when he brings into play what Mead, too, must concede in spite of all otherwise severe criticism:

> He was peculiarly successful in analysing the phase of social degeneration. He could show that unhealthful social conditions reflect themselves in degenerate selves, and he could indicate the responsibility of the environment for the degeneration, at the same time recognizing the responsibility that belong to the self [Mead 1930: 700].

Mead commendably acknowledges what his own social psychology leaves unexposed and what will inspire and urge Goffman "to develop a sociological version of the structure of the self" [Goffman 1961a: xiii] as the basis of his sociology of the interaction order: The identity of a self is at stake in every social situation. For the self is not just an open horizon full of possibilities for development but structurally insecure and vulnerable, because social situations are full of imponderables and shoals that always expose it to the risk of being threatened and weakened. Because for Goffman "what the person protects and defends and invests his feelings in is an idea about himself" [Goffman 1967: 43], he develops the analytical concept of the 'face' to be able to describe and determine precisely this idea for his sociological investigation of the structure of the self. The concept of the 'face' forms the hook of the interaction order as reality and sociological field of investigation *sui generis*, and it lays the foundation for a whole toolkit of terms and further concepts building on it.

However, for this crucial step, Goffman must at a second theoretical point think with Cooley beyond Mead again. This is because in the concept of 'face' aspects of a self's social identity, personal identity, and ego identity combine to form a bundle of characteristics that help a person to achieve social visibility, meaning, and acceptance, with which he or she can prove himself or herself on the public stage: "Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share" [Goffman 1967: 5]. Mead focused his interest on the phase of primary, early childhood socialization in well-coordinated social groups, and by complex society he meant an increase of norms, values and social control by a differentiating 'generalized other'. In contrast, Goffman directs his attention to the phase of secondary socialization, in which individuals, in capitalistically organized competitive capitalistic societies struggle for social visibility, for significance and for acceptance, and for this purpose produce marketable images like on an assembly line serving them as currency in social intercourse. To support the argument that the presentation of self in everyday life demands images which stage an idealised, even mystified self for social others, Goffman utilizes two lengthy quotations from Cooley's *Human Nature and Social Order* [Goffman 1959: 35, 67]. However, it is exactly at this point that Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann draw attention to the special socio-historical conditions of Goffman's model, and thus to its limited scope compared to Mead's general, anthropological and socio-psychological presuppositions elaborated for social theory:

A very interesting further point suggested by our analysis concerns the structural limits within which a 'Goffmanian model' of social interaction may be viable – to wit, societies so structured that decisive elements of objectivated reality are internalized in secondary socialization processes. This consideration, incidentally, should make us careful not to equate Goffman's 'model' (which is very useful, let it be added, for the analysis of important features of modern industrial society) with a 'dramatic model' *tout court*. There have been other dramas, after all, than that of the contemporary organization man bent on 'impression management' [Berger, Luckmann 1966: 230f.].

Unquestionably, Goffman's thinking was under the influence of contemporary circumstances and sensitivities, and undoubtedly, he would have agreed with this assessment. However, the crucial point is that he was interested in focusing on the competitive and cooperative everyday life of the American middle class at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century in case studies, and describing these snapshots in terms of interaction theory. For this reason, he was convinced that sociology as a whole could not produce all-explanatory and conclusive theories of society, but at best could only produce middle range theories.

This leads us to the third theoretical point on which Goffman coincides with Mead and Cooley beyond the general frame of reference prepared by both, and develops his sociology of interaction order based on the concept of the 'face'. For this, he is critical of

the Meadian notion that the individual takes toward himself the attitude others take to him seems very much an oversimplification. Rather the individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts. […] While it may be true that the individual has a unique self all his own, evidence of this possession is thoroughly a product of joint ceremonial labour [Goffman 1967: 84f.].

For Goffman, the self is neither pre-socially given nor exhausted in a one-sided 'impression management'. Rather, 'the face-work', by which the image of a person is constructed and ongoingly secured and repaired, takes place in cooperative interactions. The 'face' and ultimately, the self-image of an individual thus prove to be on loan from society. The fact "that the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps" [Goffman 1959: 63], makes the 'face' not just one of the many elements of an expressive order of social interaction, but rather the central form of expression of human self-interpretation in a social situation. That is why it must be protected and cultivated in a special way – for if one's 'face' is threatened or the expressive order that supports it comes into question, this does not simply scratch the surface of a mask but rather destroys a defensive shield and wounds the innermost sanctum of its bearer. The ways and means for doing so are the ritual elements in social interaction which were not addressed by sociology before

Goffman: "To study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction" [Goffman 1967: 12] – and vice versa, to study the traffic rules of social interaction means to study how 'faces' are saved.

However, in order to explore the ritual rules of the interaction order in the greatest possible range and depth, it is not enough to theorize at one's desk and occasionally look at social reality from one's armchair. "That's what Cooley did, that's what Mead did. […] But there is an ethnographic side, and you couldn't get a reasonable picture […] just by sitting down and thinking of those basic processes. You have to do what is called participant observation" [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 337].

EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS: ETHNOGRAPHY
AND PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Goffman has achieved a mastery in the observation and description of social situations. His observations and descriptions, from which he develops the basic concepts of his sociology of the interaction order, aim to grasp behaviour in social situations more precisely and more complexly than was the case with Mead and Cooley or with the representatives of Symbolic Interactionism. For in addition to the significant symbols of linguistic communication already in view there, Goffman's microanalytical view opens up the body, gestures, and facial expressions as quite crucial variables for the study of social interaction. This circumstance prompts him to make a clarification that is unusually direct for him:

> G.H. Mead's distinction between 'significant' and 'nonsignificant' gestures is not entirely satisfactory here. Body idiom involves something more than a non-significant 'conversation of gestures', because this idiom tends to evoke the same meaning for the actor as for the witness, and tends to be employed by the actor because of its meaning for the witness. Something less than significant symbolism seems to be involved [Goffman 1963a: 34, Fn. 2].

This methodological sharpening makes the analyses sensitive to even the most minor irritations and misunderstandings in social interaction, and it opens up a broad field, from strategic manipulations and deceptions in self-presentations to the ambiguities and modulations in the organization of everyday experiences and social situations.

The enduring fame and lasting influence of Goffman's books and articles are due not least to his sociological methodology and approach, which were still quite unconventional at the time. In the heyday of structural functionalism and quantitative research, the methods that are now part of the basic and self-evident tools of qualitative social research still met with widespread incomprehension

and were sharply criticized. From today's perspective, Goffman's contribution to the establishment of qualitative methods is largely undisputed. However, his reflections on the methodological approach to data collection and processing are limited to marginal notes and are found more in 'peripheral' places, such as introductions and footnotes. In contrast, the focus of the writings is on the presentation of observations already translated into terms, metaphors, and models, and condensed into concepts and conceptual frameworks. The only exception is brief remarks on the principles of ethnographic practice in a lecture Goffman gave at a workshop, which was secretly recorded and published posthumously under the title *On Fieldwork* [Goffman 1989]. He also remains reticent in one of his rare interviews: "What those methods are, I'm not the best person to say. That is, somebody would have to analyse what I do. My version would be [...] just doctrine, and not really telling you" [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 338f.].

FIELDWORK AS A METHODOLOGICAL PRIMACY

Max Weber's postulate of the freedom from value judgment is an unshakable pillar of Goffman's understanding of himself as sociologist. This ideal requirement serves him particularly well as the guiding hypothesis of his investigations since it provides the foundation and source of three premises of qualitative research procedures: openness, distance, and skepticism. That is to say, one must practice structural openness while maintaining both distance from the object of research and skepticism not only with regard to other social scientific approaches and insights but also, and primarily, to one's own preconceptions and self-constructed ideas and systems of reference [Soeffner 1997].

Goffman's value-free attitude is visible in how he understands the concept of social order, which belongs to the basic inventory of sociology. While according to Goffman "thinking about social orders has been subject to a conservative bias" and there is a prevailing "political doctrine that order is 'natural', that any order is good, and that bad social order is better than no order at all", his perspective unprejudicially encompasses all of the actor's attempts at adaptation and presentation: the conforming, unremarkable, and normal, as well as the deviant, transgressive, and rule-breaking ones [Goffman 1971: 15]. It is imperative for Goffman to keep his investigations of the sociology of the interaction order from becoming colored by value judgment – that is, not to assess any empirical manifestation of social behavior through the lens of one's own presuppositions as right or wrong, or good or bad. He prefers "to be accused of laconicity, not morality" [Goffman 1971: 20] "[...] although the method of the presentation may occasionally give

this impression" [of morality, J.R., Goffman 1963a: 5]. In his reservations against any strict, paradigmatically grounded separation between methods, Goffman saw himself primarily influenced by Everett Hughes. Nevertheless, he considered quantitative surveys to be of very limited use for the specific form of his own research program. It is true that face-to-face interaction gave rise to "many natural indicators nicely subject to measure and count" [Goffman 1971: 18]. However, to arrive at a systematic as well as a comprehensive description and interpretation of the fabric of the interaction order, with its basic elements – that is to say, all those "glances, gestures, positionings, and verbal statements that people continuously feed into the situation" – requires proceeding not by means of clearly pre-constructed and rigidly formalized methods of data generation, but rather "through serious ethnography" [Goffman 1967: 2].

The methodological primacy, which does not mean methodological exclusivity, of ethnographic fieldwork is based on the insight into the necessity of investigating interaction processes as directly and unadulteratedly as possible in the 'natural' course and context of their occurrence [Hillyard 2022, Smith 2022]. The reason for Goffman's rejection of any approaches he considered 'artificial' is that they are strongly mediated and influenced by the researcher, for example, by setting up experimental settings or conducting interviews. Instead, he favored the techniques of observation and analysis that had already been developed in linguistics and especially in ethology. The real heart of naturalistic field research, however, is participant observation, or rather, as Goffman more precisely defines it in the introduction to his dissertation, observant participation: "My real aim was to be an observant participant, rather than a participating observer" [Goffman 1953: 2]. Ethnographic observation is open to all kinds of aspects of everyday life and perception that are generally overlooked because they are taken for granted as self-evident and therefore considered of no further significance. It seeks intimate proximity to completely ordinary, everyday actions. This special observant attitude and perspective requires an on-going balancing act between the most intense closeness to and simultaneous maintenance of controlled distance from the conditions and circumstances of the social situation being investigated. The demanding requirements of this approach and the very unique opportunities it offers to acquire insight are clearly laid out by Goffman in an exposition of field research:

> By participant observation, I mean a technique [...] of getting data, it seems to me, by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation, or their ethnic situation, or whatever. [...] To me, that's the core of observation. If you don't get yourself in that situation, I don't think you can do a piece of serious work [Goffman 1989: 125f.].

The fruits of this "serious" ethnographic fieldwork, as Goffman understands it, consist in the enhanced attentiveness and increased sensitivity to a large number of rather inconspicuous details and supposed trivialities in the course of everyday interaction. Goffman's description of his methodological procedure as "unsystematic naturalistic observation" is therefore validated in the striving "to ensure experience with the full range of variation" [Goffman 1953: 2], that is, to remain open and receptive to the perception of the variety and complexity of social reality. It also explains his objections to any kind of recipe-like specification of a method. It's not without good reason, therefore, that Pierre Bourdieu titled his obituary of Goffman "Discoverer of the Infinitely Small" [Bourdieu 1983]. For Goffman himself, however, the microscopic magnification could not be high enough. He notes that his research efforts are akin to "pinning with our ten thumbs what ought to be secured with a needle" [Goffman 1981a: 2]. The details of the interactional order revealed by fine analysis are significant because their specific location in interactional processes contributes to the definition of social situations in the sense of the *Thomas Theorem*. Moreover, they enable social actors to identify and type each other reciprocally. Goffman therefore attributes to them a crucial micro-sociological role in the construction of self-images and 'faces', for example, when participants in a social situation see that they are seen by others, and that others can see that they see this, and they in turn can see that they are seen in their seeing as well-which causes the actors to orient at least some of their behaviors on the gaze behavior of the others in order to ensure the mutual protection of their 'faces'.

PROVIDING ORDER FOR WHAT YOU'VE SEEN: CONCEPTUAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

Goffman's reputation as a classic representative of sociological ethnography and participant observation is founded on a series of field studies that spanned many months, and often even many years. They built the empirical basis for his essays and books, and provided him with a continually growing, increasingly rich corpus of ethnographic observations on which he could draw again and again for subsequent publications. In the introduction to *Behavior in Public Places* Goffman states:

Some data have been drawn from a study of a mental hospital, some from study of a Shetland Island community, some from manuals of etiquette, and some from a file where I keep quotations that have struck me as interesting. […] my own experience has been mainly with middle-class conduct in a few regions of America, and it is to this that most of my comments apply [1963a: 4f.].

This points to at least two things. First, that the basic stock of Goffman's data is comprised of much more than just his own field research. Beside ethnography other recourses were always present and were used in an eclectic way to enrich, to test and to proof the fieldwork findings. And second, importantly, that the structural principle involved in compiling the additional material Goffman sometimes incorporates in places does not differ from the procedure he employs in ethnographic research. He viewed both kinds of materials: those generated autonomously and those introduced additionally, as natural data – that is, as autonomous documents of everyday perception and as everyday behavior of social actors that occurs without any impetus or 'artificial' involvement from social scientists. He therefore considered them equally worthy sources for his "unsystematic naturalistic observation" [Goffman 1971: xv], which have methodological value because they enrich the essential data of his own observations and support them through comparison. Thus, excerpts from newspaper articles or etiquette manuals and observations and descriptions from the studies of other social scientists are all incorporated equally into the illustrations and analysis of phenomena along with scenes and actions from novels, plays, films, and comic books, or biographical experiences. In his late studies on gender and conversation, even advertising images or recordings of radio programs become the source of his core data.

In this working procedure, aptly described as "conceptual constructivism" [Williams 1983: 100f., Smith 2006: 117f.], the transition to processing data provides the necessary step from the consciously unsystematic generation of data to the analytical structuring and conceptual and typological classification of materials. As Goffman puts it, "your mission is to provide order for what you've seen, and that order means structure […]; you have to end up […] with phases, structures, patterns, or you haven't said anything. […] There you are into structural sociology of one kind or another" [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 335].[3] His concrete course of action at this crucial methodological threshold cannot be translated into the discursive order of speech without losing something: "mysterious – not a process that I can explicate at all." But it seems to him like a wavering and tentative movement – "a sort of freewheeling […]; much more freewheeling and crude than analytical induction" – about which he can report only this much:

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[3]   Detailed ethnographic observations and descriptions of social situations provide indispensable, but not yet sufficient answers to the question of what is going on in a social situation. Rather, the observations and descriptions must be abstracted step by step into theoretical constructions. Otherwise, ethnographic practice remains descriptive and illustrative, case-bound and episodic, and results at best in descriptive reports or vivid reportage [cf. exemplarily Goffman 2014].

> When I do these studies I take a large number of illustrations, variously obtained, and put them all before my eyes in one form or another and try to get a formulation that is compatible with all of them, so there is a check upon just making wild imputations. [...] I collect lots of different things and force myself to try to find the formulation that's relevant and consistent with it [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 338ff.].

The work of systematization he describes can be seen to operate on two interrelated levels. Proceeding always on the basis of, and with constant reference to, the concrete empirical data at hand, the initial task of the work consists in the construction of analytical concepts. At an adjoining level of abstraction, at which the construction of conceptual frameworks occurs, these concepts are then on the one hand further differentiated into their respective types and on the other hand simultaneously interwoven with one another into an overarching structural context. In addition, the unusual perspectives Goffman achieves by means of these two devices and his surprising insights into the supposedly self-evident aspects of everyday social reality are further supported by the copious and remarkably creative, occasionally ironic or even cynical use of analogies and metaphors. This inspires comparisons, correspondences, and reciprocal illumination, which all serve to further characterize the concepts and conceptual frameworks and allow Goffman to demonstrate both the points of contact between his constructions and the boundaries of their scope. Some examples of the first, tentative organization of data collection by means of the assembly of analytical concepts are, in rough succession, the conceptual, typological differentiation between 'focused interaction' and 'unfocused interaction'; 'vehicular units' and 'participation units'; 'natural frameworks' and 'primary social frameworks'; 'front stage' and 'back stage'; 'primary adjustment' and 'secondary adjustment'; 'role play' and 'role distance'; 'avoidance rituals' and 'presentational rituals'; or between the 'inmate world' and the 'staff world' of formal organizations.[4] While continuing to introduce further empirical data, Goffman expands his analytical concepts into the more finely articulated and now systematically organized conceptual frameworks, which are in turn illustrated by a variety of examples taken from the corpus of data. An example of such a conceptual framework can be found in *Relations in Public* [Goffman 1971]. Here, proceeding from the conceptual differentiation between vehicular units and participation units, Goffman goes on to describe the 'territories of the self', with

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[4] Goffman's urge toward structure and systematization discernably distanced him from Georg Simmel and his formal sociology – which was rather lacking in that regard – and placed him in epistemological and methodological proximity to Émile Durkheim, with the latter's equally dichotomies between 'sacred' and 'profane' or 'negative rites' and 'positive rites', which were fundamental to the description of *The elementary forms of the religious life.*

their typology of 'personal space', 'stall', 'use space', 'turns', 'sheaths', 'possessional territory', 'informational preserves', and 'conversational preserves'.[5]

In addition to adopting the postulate of value-free judgment, Goffman follows Max Weber's methodology and procedure in another fundamental respect when he relies upon the working principle of the construction of ideal types for the development of his analytical concepts and above all his conceptual frameworks. Goffman's conceptual frameworks are ideal types in Weber's sense, first, because of their utopian character, for their categories never manifest themselves in empirical reality in such pure form and in such precise distinction from one another; but their analytical purity and precision allow the distance between the ideal type constructions and the empirically observable social reality come clearly to the fore and facilitate special insights into social conditions. Second, constructions of ideal types are extremely flexible, readily available sociological instruments. After all, under different or changing conditions, and in light of further analytical perspectives, they must continually be re-constituted, corrected, refined, and occasionally completely replaced. Third, the individual categories of the typologically constructed conceptual frameworks are ultimately aligned with and separated from one another according to a logical structuring principle.

As much as this methodological operating principle may help lead to particular insights into the social reality of the interaction order, it does harbor some methodological problems, which occasioned criticism. The criticism was in part polemical, but also highlighted the impressionistic and suggestive character of the constructions. Goffman was certainly aware of these problems but pointed to the epistemological advantages of his approach. When the concepts that have been aggregated into frames of reference become methodological controls and are in turn applied to the original data for comparison, they usually generate new observations and thus compel the revision of the original analytical concepts or indeed the construction of further ones. In their structure and thrust, however, both constructions reveal the possibility, if not the necessity, for internal modification, for a revision of terminology that leads to a new conceptual draft. Moreover, the

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[5]   Other conceptual frameworks include the institutional ceremonies that provide the social connection between the 'inmate world' and 'staff world' in *Asylums* [Goffman 1961a], such as the house organ and the group therapy, annual parties and Christmas celebrations, the institutional theatrical and the annual open house, and charitable performances and Sunday services. Similarly, the differentiation between natural and primary social frameworks in *Frame analysis* [Goffman 1974] provides the ground for the description of 'modulations', such as make-belief, contents, ceremonials, technical redoings, and regroundings, and 'self-deceptions', such as dreams, dissociated states, psychotic propensities, hysterical symptoms, and hypnotism.

constructions allow for the incorporation of other criteria of differentiation and can also be applied to one another reciprocally or nested into one another, which equally entails the development of new concepts and other frames of reference. This accounts for Goffman's summation, which is by no means as resigned as it sounds: "I have no strong belief in what I espouse. I claim it's a reasonable operating hypothesis, and if people take a different view, it ends up with other problems" [Goffman in Verhoeven 1993: 327].

The level of complexity attained in the process of constructing the analytical concepts and conceptual frameworks marks the limits of the generalizability of sociological assertions as such. Like his teachers and models Robert E. Park, Everett C. Hughes, and Georg Simmel, Goffman harbors a fundamental skepticism toward overarching sociological theories, which he even extends to the conception of any kind of sociological theory, no matter its intended scope:

> I have grave doubts about the value of recent grand sociological theories, and grand doubts about their circumspect successors – theories of the middle range. [...] Yet I believe that the provision of a single conceptual distinction, if it orders and illuminates, and effects delight in the contours of our data, can warrant our claim to be students of society. [...] So what we need, I feel, is a modest but persistent analyticity: framework of the lower range [Goffman 1981b: 4].

In this regard, Goffman does not hesitate to apply this skepticism to his own constructions. He understands his concepts and frameworks as heuristics, the analytical worth of which is measured not at all by how doggedly they can supposedly stand up to empirical reality, but solely by whether they provide impetus for new research into partial segments of the social order – research that continually expands into new territory and rests on different arrangements. A methodological note in the foreword to his last book pointedly articulates this position:

> The ideas purport to be general (in the sense of always applicable), and worth testing out. This is the warrant for repeated approaches from different angles and the eventual retracing of practically everything. Yet, of course, none of the concepts elaborated may have a future. So, I ask that these papers be taken for what they merely are: exercises, trails, tryouts, a means of displaying possibilities, not establishing fact [Goffman 1981a: 1].

Goffman's conceptual constructions pursue a structuring and systematizing task. The sociology of the interaction order, however, does not aim to create a cartography of social reality based on a fixed matrix of structural grids. Rather, it attempts to use ever new and changing approaches to approximate a lived social order that is constantly reproducing and transforming itself. The concepts and conceptual frameworks derived for this purpose from the analysis of empirical reality should be stimulating and dynamic enough to be applied flexibly and creatively to this empirical reality as 'measuring instruments.'

THE INTERACTION ORDER IN THE AGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Only late in his work does Erving Goffman explicitly make technical media and media-mediated communication his topic. It is true that in his earlier writings there are also references to novels and newspaper articles, to magazines or comics, from which he quotes for illustration or whose influences on social action and social situations he observes. But his primary interest was not in media-mediated communication, but in face-to-face communication: in the immediate interactions that were also at the heart of Georg Simmel's sociology.

For Simmel and Goffman, presence in social situations is primarily directed to the human body and the senses, and implies spatial and temporal relations, proximity and accessibility, and even impressions of immediacy and evidence. The so-called face-to-face situations, in which we meet each other 'in the original' and can see, hear, smell, feel and – if we want to – even taste each other, are therefore the archetype of social interactions for the social sciences. For in physical co-presence and in the potential use of our five senses we learn, check and correct our acting, reacting and speaking, as well as the interpretation of movements, gestures, facial expressions, touches, of colors and smells, of actions and of spoken language. In this sphere lies the original scenario of human experiences and performances, for the inculcation of symbolic action and for coordinated interpretations of meaning and sense-making – the more senses there are, the more sense there is. In physical co-presence the interplay of expressions and interpretations, which are not necessarily unambiguous and free of contradictions, is responsible for giving the impression of the interaction partner's outstanding accessibility, of their true experience of each other and of each other's actual recognition. According to the prevailing view, what takes place in such "pure we-relationships" [Schutz, 1962: 16] can at best be stimulated by technically mediated communication and digital presence. For this reason, media applications are essentially limited to bridging the space and time until the next social encounter in physical co-presence or to preparing the conditions for it. The sometimes unexpectedly extensive withdrawal of interaction partners from social events is therefore one of the most impressive and lasting experiences of the Corona pandemic. Video conferencing, in particular, seems in many cases to override the irreplaceability of faces, bodies, and spaces that has been repeatedly confirmed in lifeworld experience.

Furthermore, human presence takes place in the field of tension between the need for recognition and disclosure on the one hand and a sense of shame and concealment on the other, for which we stage our self-dramatization and enrich

it with interpretive clues. In these processes the immediate aesthetic qualities of the face play a literally outstanding role, in addition to posture and gestures. The visibility given by the face can be evaded – at least to a limited extent – only by those who avoid the gaze of the other or steer it into predetermined paths and thus rob the other of something of the possibility of making sure of herself or himself; or in Goffman's words: "If we see perception as a form of contact and communion, then control over what is perceived is control over contact that is made, and the limitation and regulation of what is shown is a limitation and regulation of contact" [Goffman 1956: 9].

However, one's own facial expressions and gaze naturally elude self-awareness and thus comprehensive self-control. They are only reflected in their effects, especially in the looks and the accompanying mimic reactions of others, and are therefore always grasped somewhat too late. This is why the 'face', that well-formed, unified social figure that one ultimately creates as an image, or an idealized idea for oneself and others, is something fragile that, in *The presentation of self in the everyday life* [Goffman 1959], smacks of the provisional, uncertain, and endangered, which is why we nurture and protect it with special care. If our 'face' gets off track, if it is doubted or even threatened, this not only scratches the surface of a mask (lat. *persona*), but it also destroys a social protective shield and violates our "ideal sphere" [Simmel 1906: 453].

Unlike the time when there was physical co-presence, during the Corona pandemic human faces disappeared behind masks, and the extensive covering of the mouth and nose is perceived as physically, symbolically and socially annoying and disturbing. Video conferencing in formal situations with significant frequency leads to voluntary, almost complete blanking out, often with the name tags as the only things left behind. Like the ring-bearer in J.R.R. Tolkien's famous fantasy trilogy, people in virtual space then move as if in an intermediate realm, simultaneously inside and outside the social situation. However, this is not based solely on the fact that "one feels participation in every interaction as an obligation" [Goffman 1971: 11], because in the arenas of the public sphere, unfavorable information about oneself or others is easily exchanged. Rather, agents are confronted with new demands for probation. Additional theatrical qualities are required when the actors in video conferences permanently take a look at themselves while acting, see themselves, look at themselves, observe themselves and control themselves in the processes of self-perception and perception by others. The continuous reflection of oneself in the reactions of others, described by Charles Horton Cooley as the "looking-glass self", demands new forms of self-presentation in the age of digital reproduction. We shift their re-

hearsal to the backstage in order to prepare ourselves for the optical tests of our soon-to-be interaction partner, not unlike Travis, the main character in Martin Scorsese's *Taxi driver*, who stages his facial expressions, gestures and pose in one of the most famous shots in film history before an imaginary audience by means of his mirror image.

Moreover, sociable qualities are also in demand in "synthetic situations" [Knorr Cetina 2009]. For where video conferences in formal situations only know the core business in the temporal sequence of meetings, the spaces for spontaneous, 'accidental' opportunities for sociability are dwindling. As Simmel has shown with the example of small talk and Goffman with the example of teamwork in surgical procedures, social situations in physical co-presence are framed and interwoven by sociable interactions [Simmel 1949; Goffman 1961b]. Their success requires specific observation and action skills that are both tactful and creative. It is not the juxtaposition or simple addition of the two qualities, but rather their complex interlocking that currently makes appearances on the digital media stages tedious, even annoying, for many. Undoubtedly, actors will adapt to the changing perceptual arrangements and find routines and rituals for the changing interpretive and staging requirements. If the Corona pandemic has merely advanced and exacerbated the social distancing that has been emerging for some time, the traditional reference points of social science observation and conceptualization will also shift and expand. Digital presence then, no longer appears merely as a deficient substitute for face-to-face situations, but as a section of reality *sui generis*, just like the many other forms of technical communication that were first unfamiliar, then had to be learned, and soon became part of the world taken for granted. Sociological research thus has the task and the opportunity to constantly review, correct, and enrich Erving Goffman's classic metaphor bundle of the sociology of interaction order.

Discussions with particular relevance to the applicability and contemporaneity of Goffman's work therefore identify the continuing significance of his key substantive concepts and best-known terms for investigating their research subject and for sensitizing the analytical work, especially for a sociological understanding of how digital communication changes the presentation of self, the practices of impression management, and identity [Schwartz, Halegoua 2015; Tashmin 2016; Gottschalk 2018]. A representative example for this point of view are the key findings of research which finds "that the online self is 'anchored' to the offline one, and that disparity between the two selves is minimized", which means that "identity does not really change online, it is still informed by the offline self. This type of statement, in itself, emphasizes a key premise in Goffman's work – that, when

in 'front stage' we deliberately choose to project a given identity" [Bullingham, Vasconcelos 2013: 110]. Other vivid examples are studies on the use of mobile phones [Retti 2009; Ling 2010], especially in visual ethnography, which show how actors in public spaces use their smartphones as "involvement shields" in order to signal either their willingness to communicate, or to indicate their current situation as a moment of self-exclusion, and their will for social inaccessibility [Ayaß 2014]. So far, one still tends to agree: "The 21st-century interaction order may, despite appearances, have changed surprisingly little since Goffman's time. […] This suggests that the concept remains a robust and fruitful heuristic device for understanding the generic realities of everyday life." This is why "Erving Goffman's sociology still has much to contribute to how we understand this new world. Humans remain humans, after all" [Jenkins 2010: 272].

CONCLUSION

Erving Goffman's terms, concepts, and conceptual frameworks for describing immediate interactions in physical co-presence are stimulating and dynamic enough to apply to the analysis of technologically mediated communication, especially if sociology is to be sensitive to the subtle differences between the various changing forms of self-presentation in the age of digital media. The most crucial elements, however, are not so much the concrete concepts and conceptual frameworks of the interaction order itself [Merunková, Šlerka 2019; Walsh 2022], but rather their fundamental theoretical and methodological underpinnings. As seen in this article, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley, on the one hand, and ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, on the other, constitute the two vanishing points of Goffmanian sociology from which the horizon of social action can be viewed in remarkable breadth and depth. This close structural connection between theory and method also marks the common denominator to which the almost unanimous conviction of the high connectivity of Goffman's approach to current manifestations of media communication can be traced.

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POWIĄZANIA POMIĘDZY TEORIĄ A METODĄ
W SOCJOLOGICZNEJ KONCEPCJI ŁADU INTERAKCYJNEGO
ERVINGA GOFFMANA

Abstrakt

Kryzysy społeczne zwracają uwagę na kruchość i tymczasowość życia codziennego. Wywołuje to nie tylko rozdrażnienie, niepewność i lęk wśród aktorów społecznych, lecz wydobywa również na światło dzienne reguły porządku społecznego, które do tej pory spełniały swą powinność działając niezauważalnie dla aktorów społecznych. Zwłaszcza ograniczenia fizycznej współobecności podczas pandemii COVID-19 wywołały ponowne zainteresowanie znaczeniem i aktualnością porządku interakcyjnego obserwowanego i opisanego przez Ervinga Goffmana. Co dzieje się z rytuałami porządku interakcyjnego, gdy spotykanie się z innymi osobami jest w coraz mniejszym stopniu uzależnione od fizycznej obecności? I jakie są implikacje tych zmian dla „Ja" w dobie obecności cyfrowej? Czerpiąc z jednej strony z George'a Herberta Meada i Charlesa Hortona Cooleya, a z drugiej z etnograficznych badań terenowych i obserwacji uczestniczącej, w artykule przedstawiony i omówiony zostaje teoretyczny i metodologiczny kamień węgielny socjologii Goffmana. Przedstawione są ponadto argumenty na rzecz tezy, iż kluczowe dla ciągłej przydatności Goffmanowskiego porządku interakcyjnego, nie tylko dla badania działań społecznych w mediach cyfrowych, są nierozerwalne związki między właściwymi dla tej perspektywy założeniami teoretycznymi oraz szczególną koncepcją i praktyką badań empirycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, badania terenowe, etnografia, obserwacja uczestnicząca, konstruktywizm pojęciowy, komunikacja zapośredniczona, media cyfrowe