

2.2 Erving Goffman

Herbert Willems

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Goffman's methods are determined by his central object, *face-to-face interaction*. In this Goffman sees predominantly – and the whole of his method is marked by this – a world of *implicit knowledge* that actors can barely articulate or 'say' because of its habitual nature. The kind of knowledge he means is manifest, for example, in the equally unconsidered and subtly adapted behaviours of looking, smiling, tactful avoidance or repartee. A result of the 'unconscious' nature of this kind of behaviour (Giddens speaks of 'practical consciousness' as opposed to 'discursive consciousness') is the limited nature of methods that depend on explanations and self-descriptions from the actors under investigation (for example, interviews, or personal biographical evidence). In Goffman's view, laboratory experiments are even more limited in value because they eliminate precisely what ought to be investigated first, the 'social' nature of (interactive) behaviour.

The set of methods that Goffman used in place of what he called 'traditional investigative procedures' (Goffman 1971: XVI) will be listed below.

1 NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION

Goffman developed *interaction ethology* (1971: X). The aim of this methodological framework

is to investigate the processes of interaction 'naturalistically', that is, first to *discover* and document them in their 'natural milieu'. In a posthumously published lecture on fieldwork, Goffman (1989) stresses that it is a matter of getting as close as possible to the objects of research, and of subjecting oneself as authentically as possible to the circumstances of their life. Only in this way can the decisive goal be reached, that of a high degree of familiarity with the practice in question and its actors. In this familiarity Goffman sees a preliminary stage of sociological information which is then arranged at a first level when the investigator succeeds in discovering natural behaviour patterns in apparently unordered streams of behaviour.

In his early works Goffman uses *naturalistic observation* primarily to mean 'participant observation' (see 5.5). Working, in this sense, as an 'ethnologist of his own culture' (Dahrendorf's term), he observes, on the one hand, normal 'everyday life'. On the other hand he invokes particular, remarkable and separate worlds beyond the layman's everyday world. A remote community of peasant farmers, a gaming casino and a psychiatric institution are the best-known examples. Goffman's studies of these (cf. 1959, 1961a, 1961b) show the systematic possibilities that sociological observers have of using their own 'alienness' as a generator of information.

By becoming familiar, as an 'outsider', with the society and meanings under investigation, the researcher may experience their peculiarities as a set of differences from what he/she has taken for granted.

In his later work Goffman sees a special and especially important option for naturalistic observation in the use of audio-visual recording equipment (see 5.6, 5.7). With 'recorded' data, they produce, in his opinion, a qualitatively new basis for 'microfunctional study, that is an examination of the role of a bit of behaviour in the stream which precedes co-occurs and follows' (Goffman 1979: 24). From his belief that the 'coincidence of a subject matter and recording technology ... places the student in an entirely novel relation to his data, (Goffman 1979: 24), he does not draw the conclusion, however, that media recordings should be privileged or allowed to play the only central role.

Goffman's basic position on the question of data tends to be 'pluralistic'. He makes use of a range of materials in order to obtain alternative and complementary access routes to his research objects and alternative bases for comparison. It is also important that Goffman relies on the richness of his own primary experience and on newspaper 'stories'.

2 METAPHORS, MODELS, THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

From the very beginning Goffman's 'naturalism' means more than simply 'empiricism'. In Goffman we are dealing rather with a 'theoretically oriented empiricist' (Collins 1980: 174). Goffman's full observational, analytical and descriptive strategy therefore consists of using metaphors, concepts and models. For example, Goffman uses theatrical metaphors (1959), a ritual model (1967, 1971, 1979) and the game-theory (1969). On the one hand he is concerned with the generation of conceptual and meaning devices that are applicable, in the sense of a 'strategy of analogies' (Lenz 1991: 57), to the widest range of social practices. On the other hand Goffman aims at sociological information by means of *relative alienation* from social reality, that is, the familiar reality of everyday life. Many of Goffman's 'discoveries' are a result of the reflective and distancing perspective of his 'frames' that give new significance to the obvious and the well-known (cf. Williams 1988: 73). Here it is important that Goffman relies on certain

interpretative tools which, like the theatre or games, have their own world of meaning and reality which, however, *resembles* that of the object of investigation. This is the basis of Goffman's 'comparative analysis' which leads – in a systematic and empirically valid manner – to the determination of identities, relationships and also differences.

Goffman practises this strategy in a number of studies which, in terms of the 'interaction order' (Goffman 1983), have the same object of interest, but which are framed from different perspectives. This corresponds to his idea that there is both an unbridgeable gulf between sociological objects and methods of interpretation and also that the different methods of interpretation each have their own relativity. Goffman counters this relativity – that is, the specific blindness attached to every individual perspective in an investigation – with a pluralization of his own perspectives.

3 FROM ABNORMALITY TO NORMALITY

One of Goffman's most important research strategies has been called by Hans Oswald (1984: 212) 'the method of extreme contrast' and by Paul Drew and Anthony Wootton (1988: 7) 'the investigation of the normal through the abnormal'. This refers to the fact that Goffman uses extremes, deviations, crises, instances of anomie and other 'abnormalities' as bridges to the understanding of normal forms.

Ultimately, therefore, Goffman's analyses of strategic interaction aim to shed light on the structural principles of everyday interaction. Similarly, Goffman elaborates the 'negative experience' (1974: 378) in which normality collapses, is broken or never exists. Extreme experiences, such as those of psychiatric inmates, provide Goffman (1961b, 1963a) with a way into what ultimately 'holds normality together'.

Apart from his reliance on 'natural' contrasts or deviations, Goffman's way of using 'artificial' deviations and irritations is totally in accord with other approaches within qualitative social research. There is a kind of 'crisis experiment' (see 3.2) in his investigation of gender representation in advertising photographs (1979). There he recommends that the gender of the subjects displayed should be mentally interchanged to reveal implicit expectations of normal forms. This 'technique' could rely on the

'vast social competence of the eye and the impressive consensus sustained by viewers' (1979: 25). Here, as everywhere else, Goffman assumes that social scientists may make analytical use of their intuitive (*habitus*-)knowledge because they share this with other members of society.

4 DECONSTRUCTIONS

Goffman also pursues his goal of unveiling social 'meaning mechanisms' and 'mental machination' with a kind of sociological deconstruction hermeneutics that 'deconstructs' such daily-life constructs as that of the speaker and such distinctions as that between truth and falsehood (see, for example, 1959, 1961a, 1971, 1981). Goffman's first monograph, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which deconstructs the 'individual' into various dramaturgical functions and elements, was already conceived along these lines and may therefore be understood programmatically.

The systematic high point in Goffman's 'deconstructivist' perspective is, without doubt, his *Frame Analysis* (1974). Goffman's strategy of frame analysis, used to reveal 'unconscious' meaning complexity, corresponds to a complex system of concepts that permits the identification of different classes of frames and the description of logical transformational relationships between different frames. Transcending the level of interaction (and thereby the boundaries of microsociology), Goffman analyses and deconstructs the reflexivity and stratification of various kinds of social meaning.

5 MATERIAL CLASSIFICATIONS, IDEAL TYPOLOGIES, DIFFERENTIATIONS

One variant of Goffman's way of handling phenomena and data may be labelled 'subsumption-logical'. In *Gender Advertisements* he pursues his analytical goal on the basis of arranging and rearranging a variety of pictorial material. He makes the subsumption of 'superficially' diverse data which, on the principle of 'trial and error', he locates hypothetically in one and the same frame (1979: 25). The classification of the materials reveals a kind of form, namely a structural identity, that emerges from the recorded differential contexts. The depth and breadth of the

contextual differences in the materials somehow convey, according to Goffman, 'a sense of structure, a sense of a single organization underlying mere surface differences' (1979: 25).

The logic of this procedure corresponds to Max Weber's notion of ideal types to which Goffman explicitly refers in *Asylums* as his 'method' (1961b: 5). Concepts such as that of the 'total institution' are therefore abstract constructs, incorporating a large number of different phenomena (cf. Manning 1992: 21). Accordingly, Goffman strives to show how the elaboration of significant differences follows from the identification of common features (1961b: 5). For example, when he brings together social structures such as monasteries, concentration camps, psychiatric institutions, barracks and merchant ships and identifies them as 'total institutions', he then – in the next step – deals with the limitations of this frame, deriving from the structural peculiarities of the phenomena in question. Goffman handles every kind of data according to the same principle. For him the search for apparent or real discrepancies of facts and 'exceptions to the rule' is as important, in terms of research strategy, as the procedure of sorting in the search for an (ideal) typology.

6 SEQUENTIAL ANALYSIS

Another of Goffman's range of research strategies is 'sequential analysis', the aim of which is to reconstruct the sequence of events in the process of interaction (cf. 1971, 1981). The procedure of sequential analysis, which ethnomethodological conversation analysis (see 5.17) and structural hermeneutics (see 5.16) see as their core, relates to a notion of (interaction-) order that does not only consist of the serial adjacency of two utterances. 'Sequence' rather refers to the specific linking of elements of behaviour to a 'genuine sequential pattern. An utterance, such as a "question", can have "sequential" implications to the extent that it establishes, in respect of the following "turn(s)", by what speaker, through what activity, by what kind of utterance, and so on, it is to be realised' (Bergmann 1991: 310). In the sense of this interpretation, and relating explicitly to ethnomethodological conversation analysis, Goffman also requires the investigator to uncover the sequencing: 'We deal with the sequencing of

action in which the move of one participant is followed by that of another, the first move establishing the environment for the second and the second confirming the meaning of the first' (1971: 149).

Admittedly the sequential analysis postulated and practised by conversation analysts, as a pure 'systemic analysis', where 'the process of communication [is] more or less conceptualized as an independently organized system' (Bergmann 1991: 311), was considered by Goffman to be inadequate. What Goffman objects to here is the detachment or denial of the moral-ritual dimension of social practice, defined in culture-specific terms. It is in this dimension that Goffman discovers a *distinctive* and *distinctively sequential* ordering (cf., for example, 1967, 1971).

7 DOUBLE HERMENEUTICS

One of Goffman's most important research strategies seeks to discover implicit meaning patterns and 'world-views' in the practice of everyday life, whether they be common to all members of society or limited to particular social groups. 'One must', he says in *Frame Analysis*, 'try to form an image of the group's framework of frameworks – its belief system, its "cosmology" – even though this is a domain that close students of contemporary social life have usually been happy to give over to others' (Goffman 1974: 27). Frederic Jameson (1976), referring to this essential idea of Goffman's research programme, spoke of his 'theory of theories'. Anthony Giddens (cf. 1984: 12ff.) called Goffman's approach 'double hermeneutics' – 'double' because it is to do with the art of interpreting everyone's 'art of interpretation' (see 5.21).

This does not only refer to meaning structures and skills of judgement at the level of interaction. Goffman is also rather more concerned with practical constituents of knowledge or types of 'hermeneutics' that more or less correspond to complex life-forms and identities. In this he assumes 'that any group of persons – prisoners, primitives, pilots or patients – develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it, and that a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies

to which they are subject' (Goffman 1961b: IXf.). In addition to participant observation (see 5.5), Goffman also relies on a reflexive knowledge of particular classes of actors. As we have already said, Goffman is assuming that the knowledge of 'life-practitioners' is of a predominantly intuitive-unconscious nature (and therefore not testable), but he also believes that extreme or borderline cases, such as stigmatized people, adulterers, spies, kings, or concentration camp inmates, acquire, through their deviation from normality, a kind of discursive knowledge *about* normality. Goffman separates this 'para-sociological' knowledge, for example, from cleverness as a type, and uses it simultaneously to make inner social perspectives transparent. In this way, from 'asylums' one can also learn the 'meaning' of how the social world of the clinic is 'subjectively experienced' by the inmates (1961b: IX, cf. von Kardorff 1991: 337).

8 CONCEPT CONSTRUCTIONS

For Goffman the development of a conceptual reference system 'into which a continuously larger number of facts can be placed' (1971: XVI) is a major task for his discipline. Goffman set himself this task in the context of an interplay of theoretical and empirical work. Instead of forming 'top-down' theories he first imported conceptualization techniques into empirical work. This procedure pursues two principal goals: first, he is concerned with perspectives 'that reorder our view of social activity' (1971: XVI); secondly it is a matter of organizing, or reorganizing, large and diverse quantities of data. What is decisive is that the starting point of Goffman's approach always lies in empirical work, and from its varying particularity he then decides on a guiding analytical perspective, such as the theatre model. Goffman achieves the separation of the different guiding perspectives from conceptual systems of relationships by setting up hierarchies of 'partial constructs'. The development of these is carried out in terms of more or less abstract basic conceptual distinctions, for example the distinction between 'keying' and 'fabrication' (cf. 1974: 40ff.). To this is always attached a network of further distinctions in differing layers of abstraction that come increasingly close to the empirical. All of this always takes place during the processing of, and confrontation with, materials on which the

concepts have to prove themselves. (cf. Williams 1988: 71). The final objective of this both inductive and deductive procedure is a formal analytical language that will make it possible to describe the field of face-to-face interaction.

Goffman achieves the highest level of formalization in his 'frame analysis'. There he succeeded in developing a 'meta-schema' for the analytical description of the interaction order which also substantially incorporated his earlier conceptual apparatus. This meta-schema and its precursors in Goffman's work are, as a sociological 'map' and as a theoretical-analytical programme, rather closer to Parsons's sociology than is generally believed. Goffman's critical distance and even opposition to Parsons cannot hide the fact that his approach deserves the title of 'structural-functionalism' that is

normally associated with Parsons. And even Parsons's formalism finds, in Goffman's sociology, not an opponent but rather an emulation.

FURTHER READING

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2.3 Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks

Jörg R. Bergmann

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Harold Garfinkel (b. 1917) is widely known today as the founder of ethnomethodology. He gave this research approach its name, and in his early work, which appeared in his 1967 collection *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, he created the theoretical, conceptual and methodological foundations of the approach. The subject of ethnomethodology, according to Garfinkel, is practical everyday action in situations. Its goal is to determine the practices and procedures (or *methods*) that are taken for granted, and by means of which members of a society (or *ethnos*), in their actions, make their own behaviour perceptible and recognizable, and structure and order meaningfully the reality that surrounds them. Unlike the work of Erving Goffman (see 2.2), which dates from about the same period, Garfinkel's works are much more cumbersome and inaccessible: they are basic in their demands, thoroughly programmatic in character, and for these reasons are often very opaque. In spite of this, or perhaps even because of this, Garfinkel has attracted a large number of followers who made 'ethnomethodology' into a school of its own. In the 1960s and 1970s conversation analysis (see 5.17) developed out of ethnomethodology, as an independent research orientation that concentrates on identifying the structural mechanisms of linguistic and non-linguistic interaction. In conversation analysis the work of Harvey Sacks (1935-1975), in particular his *Lectures* (1992), was of fundamental

importance. For reasons that will be explained below, both Garfinkel and Sacks were very reserved in explaining and setting out the methods of their procedure. It will therefore be all the more revealing to examine the research style of these two scientists more closely.

1 SCIENTIFIC AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Garfinkel's decision to place everyday action at the centre of social scientific interest was not due to a fascination with the exotic nature of trivial matters. It is based, rather, on a theoretical consideration with many underlying assumptions. Garfinkel's starting point is a theme that is known in sociology as the Hobbesian Problem, and relates to the question of how social order is possible when human beings pursue egoistical goals and are therefore constantly in conflict with one another. Garfinkel began with the reflections of Talcott Parsons (1937), his doctoral supervisor, who had set out in his theory of social action a general framework for sociology, and who dominated international sociological debate at that time. Parsons saw the solution of the problem of social order not in utilitarian models of society, but in a way already landmarked by Durkheim and Freud: social order, he claimed, results from the collective adoption and internalization of