Framing Social Interaction

Continuities and Cracks in Goffman's Frame Analysis

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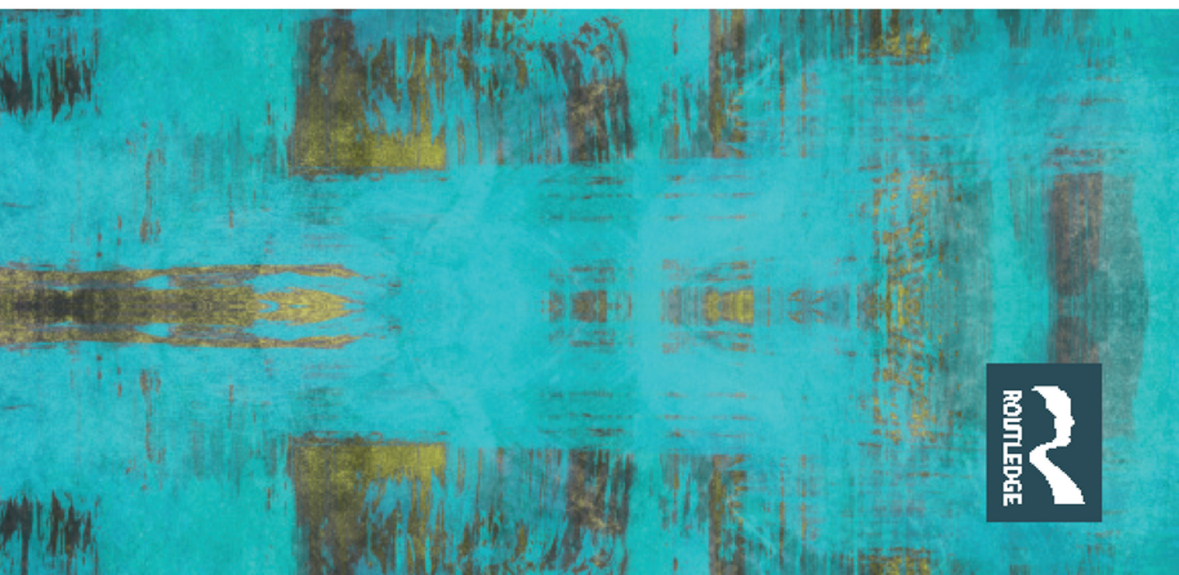
Anders Persson



Framing Social Interaction

This book is about Erving Goffman's frame analysis as it, on the one hand, was presented in his 1974 book *Frame Analysis* and, on the other, was actually conducted in a number of preceding substantial analyses of different aspects of social interaction, such as face-work, impression management, fun in games, behaviour in public places, and stigmatisation. There was, in other words, a frame analytic continuity in Goffman's work. In an article published after his death in 1982, Goffman also maintained that he, throughout his career, had been studying the same object: the interaction order. In this book, the author states that Goffman also applied an overarching perspective on social interaction: the dynamic relation between ritualisation, vulnerability, and working consensus. However, there were also cracks in Goffman's work and one is shown here with reference to the leading question in *Frame Analysis* – what is it that's going on here? While framed on a 'microsocial' level, that question ties in with 'the interaction order' and frame analysis as a method. If, however, it is framed on a societal level, it mirrors metareflective and metasocial manifestations of changes and unrest in the interaction order that, in some ways, herald the emphasis on contingency, uncertainty and risk in later sociology. Through analyses of social media as a possible new interaction order – where frame disputes are frequent – and of interactional power, the applicability of Goffman's frame analysis is illustrated. As such, this book will appeal to scholars and students of social theory, classical sociology, and social interaction.

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Continuities and Cracks in Goffman's *Frame Analysis*

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Contents

Preface

The Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) studied social interaction in a society where old-fashioned customs encountered modernising forces that were transforming political life, working life, everyday life, and other lives. He defended his doctoral dissertation in 1953. In the speech he would have delivered as president of the American Sociological Association at the 1982 congress had he not been prevented by illness, Goffman referred to the interaction order that he had investigated. This interaction order changed a great deal during the thirty years that Goffman was active, but much of what was valid at the beginning of this period was still valid at its close. During the thirty-five years that have passed since Goffman's death, the interaction order has presumably changed to a greater extent than earlier, at any rate in certain parts of the world; e.g., when it comes to relationships between young and old, men and women, authorities and others. What we call globalisation has resulted in the spread not only of goods, food dishes, labour, the market economy, refugees, traditions, illnesses, Western democracy, Islamist terror, identities, models of organisation, military activities for policing the world, bed bugs, music styles, and consumption goods, but also of different ways of interacting socially. Furthermore, new media – in particular mobile phones, the Internet, and social media – have exposed the interaction order to a transformational pressure, in that spatial proximity is no longer a prerequisite for social interaction. Many societies have thus come to be meeting places for hyper-modern forms of social interaction and old-fashioned social customs, which sometimes leads to conflict but is also most likely handled in precisely the smooth way that Goffman felt characterised the interaction order. Quite a few of Goffman's texts feel dated, not least because of a language that was then completely normal but which has later been transformed in many ways. However, his substantial analyses are amazingly vital and can be applied to current social phenomena, something I will illustrate in this book by exploring in depth Goffman's frame concept and frame analyses.

Ever since I became seriously interested in Goffman's sociology twenty-five years ago, his texts have stimulated my own research on schools, power, education, politics, and social interaction. In 2012 I published a comprehensive

book (448 pages) in Swedish: *Ritualisation and Vulnerability – Face to Face with Goffman's Perspective on Social Interaction* (Persson, 2012b), a book that aims both to introduce Goffman's sociology and to study certain aspects of it closer, among other things Goffman's frame perspective as it is presented in his book *Frame Analysis*. However, *Frame Analysis* has been a mystery to me since I first became acquainted with it. At first I believed that I myself was the reason why I found the book mysterious, because, among other things, English is not my native tongue, but I then realised that the book was sophisticated, multifaceted, contradictory, and a number of other things. This was probably important in the context, but what finally made me believe that I understood the book was that I began framing *Frame Analysis* as a book in which a method for studying the many realities of social interaction was developed in a rather praxis-oriented way. This framing has opened a number of opportunities for understanding and using *Frame Analysis*, which are presented and discussed in the present book. The purpose of this book is to investigate Erving Goffman's frame perspective: both the way it is *presented* in *Frame Analysis* from 1974, and as it is *practised* in Goffman's substantial analyses of frames, in particular those that precede *Frame Analysis*.

Scholarly research is an activity that develops in interplay and tension between the anchoring in, renewal of, and breaching of traditions, and then both positive and negative influences are of importance. Goffman had fairly little to say about this when it came to his own sociology, but in return there is an extensive body of literature that critically investigates and makes detailed connections between Goffman's sociology and that of others, and that point out a number of different and contradictory influences: Durkheim, Simmel, Freud, Cooley, Parsons, Lorenz, and Hughes. I have chosen another path in this book, but I can assure the reader that I am well acquainted with a significant part of the literature regarding Goffman's sociology. This other path means that I have chosen to study Goffman's entire *oeuvre* against the background of the frame analysis he describes in his book *Frame Analysis*. I have then searched for a frame analytical pattern in Goffman's texts, and the results are presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. The pattern I found is strongly connected to two other recurring characteristics of Goffman's sociology. First, a single object of study: the interaction order, which is described in Chapters 3 and 6. Second, an overarching perspective that functions as a kind of framework for interpretation throughout all of Goffman's works: which is described as 'the dynamic relation between ritualisation, vulnerability, and working consensus', and presented in Chapter 3. In addition, the book in your hand is introduced in Chapter 1, and Goffman himself, his position within the sociological scholarly community, and his scholarly vision are described in Chapter 2. Furthermore, in Chapters 7, 8, and 9 I attempt to illustrate in three studies how the framing perspective can be used. The first study deals with social interaction in social media, and through a frame analysis I attempt to show that a new interaction order is developing

in social media that diverges in a number of different ways from the interaction order that Goffman studied. The same set of problems is dealt with in the second study, this time applied to online chess, because chess has proven to be very constant over time, but in its online variant it is changing faster than ever before, something that is illustrated and explained with the help of parts of Goffman's conceptual apparatus. In the third study, which concerns social interaction and the exercise of power, I attempt to show that Goffman's interaction order to a great extent has to do with influence and the avoidance of influence, and that it, in combination with framing, can be developed into a kind of power perspective. In the final chapter I present a number of concluding remarks, and in an epilogue I reflect on the fascinating phenomenon of Las Vegas, a city whose very conditions of existence are a framed boundlessness, and where Goffman himself conducted participant observations of gambling. The book also includes a complete bibliography of Goffman's published texts.

Former versions of chapter 2, 3, 5 and Epilogue have been published in Swedish in my book *Ritualisering och sårbarhet – ansikte mot ansikte med Goffmans perspektiv på social interaktion* (Persson, 2012b). A former version of chapter 7 has been published in the journal *Language, Discourse and Society* (Persson, 2012a). Finally, chapter 8 has been published in Swedish in *Årsbok 2015* (Yearbook 2015) by Vetenskapssocieteten i Lund (The Science Society of Lund) (Persson, 2015).

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1 Introduction

In the autumn of 2016 two prominent American men caused dismay by violating the norms of social interaction. One of them was a Republican presidential candidate who with his populist bluster transformed – and continues to transform – American politics into a theatre of the absurd. The second was a musician and poet whose Nobel Prize in literature had just been made public, and who for this reason did nothing other than remain silent. A discussion in the media is underway about the message of the presidential candidate and about whether the old protest singer is a worthy prizewinner. It is, however, interesting that the discussion is also about how these two men create disorder by breaking the frame of what the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman (1922–82) called the interaction order, and then primarily with respect to ceremonial rules of behaviour or, to use another word, etiquette. As such, violations against frames are analysed by Goffman in his book *Frame Analysis*, and in the case of the Nobel prizewinner we may perhaps understand his actions in the following way: 'every celebration of a person gives power to that person to misbehave unmanageably' (Goffman, 1974, p. 431). However, the actions of the presidential candidate can hardly be understood in this way.

Trump, Dylan, and frame-breaking

In an article in *Washington Post* the presidential candidate's lack of self-discipline is emphasised: 'Again and again he couldn't help himself', and 'temperament matters'. Trump crowns his contempt for women as independent individuals with the words, 'such a nasty woman' instead of even trying to conduct a political conversation with his female combatant (Hohmann, 2016). In a comment in the leading Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, Hillary Clinton is described as 'normal' and Trump as 'childish' (Björling, 2016a). In addition, Trump committed another crime against democratic etiquette by saying that he will only recognise the election results if he himself wins, which made an editorial writer call this 'the most shameful statement made by a presidential candidate in a hundred and sixty years'. A year later the infantilisation continues, but now it's Trumps staff that are

the educators and the White House is being compared to an adult day care centre where the staff treats Trump as an 'undernapped toddler on the verge of a tantrum' (Graham, 2017). Lack of self-discipline, temperament, normal, childish, shameful, undernapped toddler – it is as if the political stage has become a school. In Sweden we have to go back to the beginning of the 1990s and the political party Ny Demokrati (New Democracy) to find even the hint of a political analogue. What the message of the party – 'drag under galoscherna' ('giving it some welly') – meant politically, other than a kind of general expression of populist dissatisfaction directed against an allegedly unwieldy bureaucracy, taxes, and rules for entrepreneurs, was probably not very important. It was the belittling of political culture, the violation of etiquette in itself, that was the message and which on that occasion brought the party into the Swedish Parliament.

It is the same way with Trump: the violation of etiquette is his message, not the content, if there even is one. When Trump commits violations of etiquette in debates on prime-time television, it is possible that they are unplanned, which I find hard to believe, but they become his message when voters who have been hit hard by economic crises and competition for low-income jobs receive it. These voters probably do not put their trust in the traditional political elite but are attracted to 'an otherness' that does not respect the rules that usually, even in times of crisis, regulate political discourse. So Trump does not have to know very much about politics in order to place himself right in 'his' socio-political field. It is enough for him to mutter 'wrong' and accuse Clinton of cheating, threaten to put her in jail, and drag her husband's womanising into the discussion. All this is neither here nor there but that is the very point: Trump's populism means that he displays a lack of respect for the etiquette of politics. The day after the debate in which a presidential candidate had done the most shameful thing in 160 years we heard his supporters review the debate: 'Trump hit exactly the right note. He managed to explain what he wants to do on particular issues' (Björling, 2016b). For those of us who in some sense belong to the system – educated people with jobs and all the things appurtenant to this, and thus with a more or less committed faith in the political system that has to do with acquiring the support of voters for administrating or changing things – this statement is incomprehensible and the right and the left can suddenly be united in their condemnation of Trump's lack of respect for etiquette. 'Chaos is also a system, but it is the system of the others', to borrow the words of Imre Kertész (2015).

Erving Goffman, whose sociology forms the topic of this book, developed a number of concepts in order to understand the order of social interaction. For instance, he made a useful analytic differentiation between various kinds of verbal and corporeal expressions that we communicate with when we interact with other people: *expressions given*, over which the *sender* has relatively much control, and *expressions given off*, over which the *receiver* has greater control because they are the result of the receiver's interpretations of what the sender communicates. Trump's expressions given

strike the right chord in certain voters, but it seems to be their interpretation of the expressions given off that provides substance to Trump's message, and the violation of etiquette then acquires great importance. When Trump burns his bridges, socially speaking, not least when he refuses to recognise the metapolitics that secure the regulations and etiquette of politics across party lines, his voters appear to interpret this as his being serious about his politics. After Trump's inauguration as president in 2017, a kind of organised division into two of the expressions was made that makes it possible for Trump to continue violating etiquette in his Twitter messages, while the official presidency is, to a great extent, separated from these. He thus communicates his messages over two different channels, the one being more of a channel for voters and the other more of a channel for the presidency. Once in a while the division between these two is not upheld; e.g., when Trump in March of 2017 refused to shake hands in public with Angela Merkel, but the two channels are mainly kept separate. Role distance, to use another of Goffman's concepts, is thus created – perhaps even a double role distance, where Trump as a populist distances himself in his Twitter messages from the political etiquette of the presidency while as the president he simultaneously assumes the role of a realist politician who, in opposition to his populist messages during the election campaign, bombs Syria and IS in Afghanistan, lowers taxes for high income earners, and celebrates NATO. Five months into his presidency an editorial in *The Economist* summed it up as follows ('Donald Trump's Washington is Paralysed,' 2017): 'As harmful as what Mr Trump does is the way he does it.' A Swedish columnist adds to this: 'Never before has the United States had a president so utterly devoid of style and dignity, a vulgar, ostentatious billionaire who never reads books and who occasionally encourages his followers to use violence' (Ohlsson, 2017).

But what about Dylan? His violation of etiquette vis-à-vis the Nobel prize institution is his silence, and this seems to upset some people as much as Trump's talk, and also here a kind of pedagogical discourse develops. In a column we can read the following: 'Why the hell doesn't the man say anything? What is it he's brooding over? How hard can it be to pick up the phone and say "YES, PLEASE"…'. And a few paragraphs later: 'Perhaps Bob Dylan is silent because he quite simply hasn't learned how to behave properly. Maybe he just needs some help getting on the right track' (Hilton, 2016). Many other people, soon enough an entire village, wanted to participate in the education of this 75-year-old rascal who was now also described as 'impolite and arrogant' by one of the eighteen members of the Swedish Academy, but the etiquette expert Magdalena Ribbing offers a completely different analysis: 'He's been awarded this prize for being a person of genius, and one has to allow geniuses to have their peculiarities. He may not have been awarded it at all if he had been a well-groomed person in a grey suit who replied to invitations within a week' (Jones, 2016). To return to the expressions given and given off, we never really know what expressions given off really means, and they thus invite interpretation. Perhaps in this case the silence is Dylan's almost inscrutable expression, left to others to interpret.

What is it that's going on here?

This introductory exercise shows that Goffman's perspective on social interaction is still useful, in spite of its foundations being laid down in the 1950s. When Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1959 and partly based on his doctoral dissertation from 1953, develops a dramaturgical perspective on social interaction in organisations and institutions, he justifies this strategy as a complement to four other perspectives used at that time and still found frequently in social science studies: the technical one, which emphasises efficiency; the political one, which largely has to do with the exercise of power; the structural one, which focuses on social status and relationships in networks; and the cultural one, which deals with moral values (Goffman, 1959, p. 239ff). The dramaturgical perspective emphasises what Goffman called impression management, which in part means that both individual and collective actors to a lesser or greater extent attempt to act or make it appear as if they are acting largely in accordance with community and social norms for how actors should be, act, and interact in different contexts, and in part means that actors attempt to influence other people so that they will embrace the actors' own definition of a common social situation. In a way it can be said that a dramaturgical perspective represents a combination of the political and cultural perspectives, because it combines an exercise of power in the form of influence (albeit, on a level of social interaction rather than on a societal level) with values, or, in Goffman's version, norms.

Concretely, the dramaturgical perspective means two things: first, that Goffman strongly emphasises the expressive aspect of social action, by which it should be understood that not only do we act, but we also think about how our actions are perceived by other people, or, in other words, the impressions our actions give rise to in other people. Secondly, it means that Goffman is using quite a few concepts from the world of the theatre in order to emphasise precisely the expressive aspect of action; e.g., role, performance, stage, frontstage, and backstage. This perspective could probably have been perceived as superficial when the book was published, but if we see it as a prophecy it has been extremely successful. Returning to Trump, one may well ask what he is other than a product of a certain setting, not least because he is completely ignorant, politically speaking. His thing is impression management! – not least through the expression 'You're fired!', Trump's stock line in the reality show *The Apprentice* earlier and which now also appears to have become his stock line in the White House. The dramaturgical perspective has also surfed the neoliberal tsunami of marketisation, which has not only fragmented the only real existing alternative to capitalism as a system, but also, with the help of new public management, transformed almost all the institutions in society that are *not* actors in the market into actors in politically constructed markets, where they are forced to sell something that previously was not a commodity and thus implement

impression management. Since 1959 the marketisation of society as a whole has increased, and impression management now describes a completely central aspect of the actions of market actors, whether they are individuals or organisations. Impression management in the form of inflated real estate values and share prices, doped-up performances, and rigged CVs, has thus been entered into the annals of history with names like Fannie Mae, Kaupthing Bank, Justin Gatlin, and Paolo Macchiarini. Goffman's perspective – which in addition consists of so much more than a dramaturgical perspective – is in many ways more alive than ever before.

If by way of introduction I should attempt to summarise my view of Goffman's sociology, I would like to emphasise that Goffman has a kind of generic perspective, which in Chapter 3 is presented as *the dynamic relation between ritualisation, vulnerability, and a temporarily working consensus*. This is a kind of metaperspective on social interaction that to a great extent decides how Goffman interprets and understands the object of study that links his texts: the social interaction order. Within the framework of this object of study, three themes stand out in Goffman's sociology. First, a *theme of politeness and respect*, which was expressed clearly in his investigations of rituals in the 1950s and of social interaction in the 1960s. Second, the *theme of social illusion*, which is pervasive because of Goffman's particular interest in the construction of social illusions that follows from expectations of normality and that is created by us all under the cover of the rituals of everyday life when we engage in impression management but also by social imposters of different kinds, and that is given significant expression in, e.g., the books *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and *Stigma* around 1960 and *Frame Analysis* from the 1970s. Third, and finally, a *theme of crisis* in the 1970s within whose framework an investigation of the crisis of the social interaction order can be discerned, not least in the books *Relations in Public* 1971 and *Frame Analysis*. At the same time that there is a frame analytic continuity in Goffman's studies of the interaction order, we can also, on a different level, see a kind of break that first becomes clear in the book *Relations in Public* (1971). While the texts preceding this book were to a great extent characterised by assumptions about order and accounts that suggested order, Goffman slips in a dissonant chord in *Relations in Public* that may be called contingency. Contingency also becomes a powerful theme in the book that followed three years later, *Frame Analysis*, something that can be illustrated not least by the question that gives meaning to his frame analysis itself: What is it that's going on here?

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