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Ritualization and Vulnerability - face-to-face with Goffman's perspective on social interaction (contents and summary)

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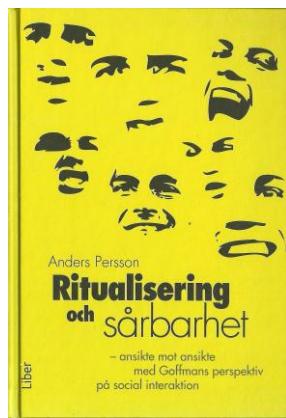
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Anders Persson¹

Ritualization and vulnerability

- face-to-face with Goffman's perspective on social interaction²

Erving Goffman was quite a controversial, contradictory and somewhat enigmatic person. He did not appear in public and kept apart his private and professional life. Perhaps was the reason for choosing covert observation as a research method his own skilfulness in keeping his integrity. Goffman didn't want to be photographed, but in one of his studies he was analyzing 500 photos of other persons. Contradictions also leave mark on what I call his method of contrasting effect, by which he could study the life in a mental hospital in order to understand the social life on the outside. Goffman often indicated that his results principally was applicable to middleclass-life in North America, a highly developed capitalist market-society, but his results was ultimately grounded on observations of and in a small crofting community in the Shetland Islands.



A characteristic trait of Goffman's sociology is its unwillingness to be a System and its simultaneous willingness to systematize the interactional swarm of everyday life. Such a sociology, as its originator, resist in itself systematizing and its contradictions tends to come forward. If I in spite of that was forced to draw only one conclusion from my investigation of Goffman's sociology, I will undoubtedly conclude that Goffman show us that the individual and the social reality are much more complex than both rational reason and common sense give expression to. My book, *Ritualization and vulnerability*, is about Goffman, his position in the sociological field, his sociological perspective, methods and scientific outlook and also about it's up-to-dateness and potentialities. The following text is a translation of the table of contents and the summary in the book.

Contents

Chapter 1. Attractive surface and surprising depths

Two existential conditions and two constants in the sociology of Goffman

A tricky sociologist and a carnivalistic sociology

Aim and content of the book

Part I. The Goffman perspective

Ch. 2. Social interaction and everyday life

Remarks on the discussion of the sociological perspective of Goffman

A mystery: What is the meaning of "everyday life" in the Goffman perspective?

Everyday life in sociological research

The underground perspective of the Chicago school as a politics of truth

Do not take the world at face value, but social interaction is everywhere

Ch. 3. The interaction order is in the balance: ritualization, vulnerability, and temporarily working consensus

Ritualization

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² Published in Swedish in March 2012 under the title *Ritualisering och sårbarhet – ansikte mot ansikte med Goffmans perspektiv på social interaction* (448 pages) by Liber publishing house (front cover above).

Definitions of ritual

Ritual as conception and phenomenon in Goffman

Vulnerability

Temporarily working consensus and the dynamics of social interaction

Part II. Impression management, information control, and social constraint

Ch. 4. Performance: roles and impression management

Role theory

The role concept in functionalist theory

The role concept in symbolic interactionism

Goffman's role concept

Role and identity

To twist, turn, and squirm: role embracement and role distance

Role distance and performance

Impression management and definition of the situation

Impression management

Front region and back region

Back and front region as the difference between being "off" and "on"

Ch. 5. Social information control: stigma and identity management

Identity

Stigma and identity management

Stigmatization in simultaneous phase-out and development

Ch. 6. Social constraint: interaction order, identity-values and total institutions

The interaction order

Rules of conduct

The social interaction of civil inattention

Identity-values

Total institutions and secondary adjustments

Part III. Goffman

Ch. 7. Essentially contested and contradictory

A contradictory outsider

Popular and contested

Tricks, humour and playing with the borders between back and front region

Goffman in private

Ch. 8. Goffman and the sociological science-society

Deep and/or encoded sociology?

The individual and the science-society

Goffman and the sociological science-society

Goffman in Swedish sociology

Goffman is no welfare-sociologist

Popular in undergraduate education

Part IV. Unsignificant others, frames and methods

Ch. 9. Among unsignificant others – in public places and on the Internet

Front and back region in change

The oversharing phenomenon

Mobile telephone calls and oversharing in public places

Social media and oversharing

Broad and narrow transmission of expressions

A general comparison between f2f (face-to-face) and p2p (persona-to-persona)

Borders between front- and backstage in social media

Unsignificant others and different forms of interaction

The unsignificant other

Focused and unfocused interaction

Ch. 10. The social dynamics of the situation – an interpretation of the frame concept

The frame concept

The frame phenomenon

Examples of frames in everyday life

Frame as the social dynamics of the situation

The cognitive aspect: social information and the organization of experience

The interactive aspect: definition of the situation and shared understanding of reality

The situational aspect: the situation as a frame and its social dynamics

Ch. 11. Observation, contrasting effect and concept formation – Goffman's methods and scientific outlook

Observation: trying to see things as they appear in their own context

Some ethic reflections on covert participant observation

Complete observer and participant-as-observer

Contrasting effect

Concept formation as a tool for systematizing, analysis and interpretation

Conceptual resilience

Goffman's research style and scientific outlook

V. Conclusion

Ch. 12. Critique of the total – Goffman's dynamic perspective

Summary

My contributions to the research on the sociology of Goffman

Concluding remarks

Critique of the total

Trust in a society of fear and suspicion

Goffman: sober among drunks

Naturalistic observation on concrete and abstract islands

Epilogue: Action and everyday life in Las Vegas

Action!

Framed boundlessness

Everyday life in Las Vegas

Thanks!

References

Used literature

Complete bibliography of the writings of Goffman

Goffman's texts

Index

Summary

This book aim at introducing, deeper study and, at some points, further develop the sociological perspective of Erving Goffman. The *opening chapter* reminds us that the sociology of Goffman has two existential conditions: firstly we always share social situations with other individuals and, secondly, we lack knowledge that are completely reliable of those individuals and situations. Goffman transform these conditions to two problems regarding sociological knowledge: definition of the situation and social information. Further, two constants leave mark on his sociology: social interaction and situation. The interaction order

is Goffman's object of study per se and the situation, as a frame inside which social interactions come into existence, is a central instrument of analysis.

In *part I* the Goffman perspective is presented and discussed on the one hand in *chapter 2* starting from the concept and phenomenon of "everyday life" and it's somewhat enigmatic status in Goffman's sociology and, on the other hand, in the light of the simultaneous ritualization and vulnerability of social interaction. These two chapters are in reality a result of my study of Goffman's sociology, but has been placed in the beginning of the book as a frame that hopefully will give the reader a possibility to derive greater benefits from the following chapters.

Part II contains of three chapters about Goffman's basic studies of social interaction. *Chapter 4* focus on performance, here meaning appearance, show, construction and the like, and more precisely on that in Goffman's sociology and his so called dramaturgical perspective that is about role. I want the reader to understand the difference between the functionalistic role theory, that almost have become extinct in sociology, and Goffman's expressive role theory where the role is a kind of variable front or mask that both individuals, groups and organizations use in order to manage impressions and definitions of situations. Unlike the functionalistic the expressive role theory has undergone further development in institutional organizations theory, gender theory and social psychological identity theory. In addition roles as expressive tools can be used in creative ways as they give both actors and interactors the possibility to be someone or something other than they are at the moment and even, through role distance, many others at the same time.

Chapter 5 deals with identity and take as its point of departure Goffman's research on stigma - stigma meaning that an individual do no fully get recognition from others because he/she deviates from the identity-values of society. The individual manage how her/his own more or less plastic identity is displayed through information control, illustrated by the identity-work of stigmatized individuals. They show some and hide other aspects of themselves. In *chapter 6* we are moving from the immediate social interaction to a kind of institutions that regulate social interaction by social constraint and pressure. Such an institution is the interaction order, which is founded on both trust on and fear of the other and also show that there are patterns in social interaction. The identity-values of society is an institution that express a general view of how individuals are supposed to be regarding looks, values, goals and group affiliation and consequently also patterns social interaction. The identity-values explains why we sometimes try to hide some aspects of ourselves, such as bad teeth, bulging bellies, lacking knowledge of languages and social background. Among those forces that regulates social interaction we also find much more manifest institutions than the interaction order and the identity-values, namely total institutions (such as prisons, mental hospitals, boarding schools and ships), whose sociological characteristics also are presented and discussed in this chapter.

Part III is about Goffman as a person and sociologist. *Chapter 7* tells the story of a quite contradictory person that in interactions with others both confirmed and contradicted his own sociological view. *Chapter 8* describes Goffman inside the sociological science-society, how others understood him and his sociology and how Goffman's perspective was presented, or rather not-presented, in Swedish sociology textbooks during the period 1970-2000.

Part IV contains of three chapters that aim at deepening the understanding of Goffman's sociology and further develop it. In *chapter 9* Goffman's studies of social interaction in public places are presented and with the help of Goffman's soft criticism of George Herbert Mead I am developing the concept "the unimportant other", which describes the structural conditions that exist in public places. Referring to my own study of mobile telephone calls in public places I pass over to social interaction on the Internet and treat blogs, Facebook and other

social media as a kind of public places and show that they can be analyzed with the interactionist concepts of Goffman. *Chapter 10* is devoted to one of Goffman's most fascinating and productive concepts: frame. I understand his frame analysis as an extension, not a violation, of his earlier work and especially of the central concepts situation, definition of the situation, and social information. Through investigations of the cognitive, interactive, and situational aspects of the frame concept and phenomenon I see frames in their capacity to define and organize frameworks that, when effective, regulate the social dynamics of the interaction in situations shared by individuals. In *chapter 11* I try to make a systematic representation of Goffman's methods and scientific view. Three different methods of data gathering and analysis used by Goffman are presented: observation, contrasting effect, and concept formation. I also show how Goffman combine these methods in his studies. Research ethics are discussed in connection to the covert observation method. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Goffman's style of research and view of science and I ask what Goffman meant when he, probably provocatively, described himself as a positivist. The basis for Goffman's positivism is that social reality is socially constructed and individually defined, meaning that constructions and actions of a lot of dead and living people create the kind of social constraint we call institutions – languages, traffic systems, habits, customs, constitutions, markets, norms, education, organizations and a great many others – which we have to define when we interact with others. As I see the positivism of Goffman, never developed in any comprehensive methodological or epistemological texts, it simply means that social constructions and individual definitions can be studied systematically aiming at analytically and empirically valid statements about the social and cognitive reality.

The concluding *part V* contains of *chapter 12* that summarizes the book, point out its essential contributions to the research on Goffman's sociology and ends with some short reflections on Goffman and his sociological perspective. In an *epilogue* Las Vegas - the playground in the desert where Goffman made covert observations of playing and gaming - is being analyzed by using the concepts action, frame and everyday life.
