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Goffman's Sociology
of Everyday Life Interaction

This chapter endeavors to draw a rough picture of the most important themes and concepts in Goffman's analyses of everyday life face-to-face interaction. The chapter will illustrate how Goffman's various studies of everyday face-to-face interaction all add to the same overarching theme: the **interaction order**. Goffman's investigations of the theatrical, ritual, strategic elements of social interaction as well as his identification of the various interactional elements in everyday-life social interaction all contributed to outlining the contours of a "substantive domain in its own right" (Goffman, 1983a, p. 2). The chapter is laid out in four parts. The first part presents the dramaturgical perspective that unfolds in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life;* the second part introduces Goffman's analyses of social interaction based on game theory; the third part outlines Goffman's use of Durkheim's concept of **ritual**. We conclude the chapter by returning to Goffman's concept of the interaction order.

Theatrical Performances

Shortly before his death, in his 1982 presidential address to the American Sociological Association, Goffman (1983a) recapitulated his overall academic concern for promoting acceptance of the study of face-to-face interaction, such as the interaction that transpires in social situations in which two or more individuals are physically copresent. The investigation and promotion

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of this social domain involved various studies, each of which explored different types of social gatherings in different contexts with different equipment and among parties with different levels of acquaintanceship. In exploring the processes, structures, and elements of the interaction order, Goffman made use of conceptual metaphors (theater, game, and ritual). In Chapter 3 we went into detail with the methodological issues concerning Goffman's metaphorical redescription, while in this chapter we explore how each metaphor uncovers substantive processes and elements of the interaction order.

We start with the perhaps most well known of Goffman's conceptual metaphors: the theatrical metaphor that is presented in detail in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). This book, which is considered his most influential, is based on experiences garnered from field study in the Shetland Islands, which formed the empirical basis for his PhD dissertation, and as such the monograph can be seen as a theoretical expansion of many of the concepts (impression management, performance, discrepant roles, etc.) that were first expounded in his doctoral work. In Goffman's own words, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* may be considered a handbook presenting a sociological perspective that may be used to study the social lives of human beings. Specifically, he is interested in the type of mutual influencing that takes place between people who are physically copresent. Offering, then, a dramaturgical perspective, Goffman intends to explore certain fundamental principles underlying face-to-face interaction. Employing the dramaturgical perspective, Goffman throughout the book analyzed how a human being in "ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (Goffman, 1959, p. 8). Introducing the dramaturgical framework, Goffman suggested that when an individual is in the immediate physical presence of other people, he or she will unavoidably seek to control the impression that others form of him or her in order to achieve individual or social goals. The actor will engage in impression management. On the other side, the other participants in the social encounter will attempt to form an impression of who and what this particular individual is. They will try to form a picture of his or her identity, and for that purpose they use a number of different types of **sign vehicles**, each saying something about the person in question. Unfolding the concept of impression management, Goffman differentiates between the information that actors "give" and the information they "give off." The first type of information concerns the verbal or nonverbal symbols we consciously use in order to convey a specific meaning (e.g., traditional, explicit communication). The other type of information consists of the signs and expressions

that actors unwittingly and unconsciously emit, signs the surroundings perceive as characteristic for that person (Goffman, 1959, p. 14). In everyday face-to-face interactions, then, people are involved in two streams of communication. In Goffman's view, actors reciprocally form impressions of each other by noting the many bits of consciously emitted information, as well as through inference from appearances and nonintended information. Impression management, then, may take intentional as well as unintentional forms. When an audience member in a workshop session continually tries to make a speech instead of asking a question, he or she may be intentionally involved in forming a certain impression of him/herself as a highly dedicated scholar who rightly should have been on the presenting panel. Unintentional impression management may be illustrated by the fact that although we often feel that we behave authentically whenever together with our friends and colleagues, we may present different sides of ourselves to our friends and colleagues respectively, accommodating the specific expectations presented by our friends and colleagues.

A key concept in Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is that of **performances**. Goffman explores how everyday-life actors, by way of dramaturgical practices and the various props at hand, influence how the other actors perceive or define the situation at hand. An important part of performance is a person's "front." The front consists of the attitudes, presence and expressions actors—consciously or unconsciously—use in order to construct a certain image of who we are (Fine & Manning, 2003, p. 46). Thus, as Goffman's analysis points out, a person's chances of being taken seriously, say, as a university teacher, not only depend on the clarity and logic of his or her presentation but also eminently rely on that person's presence and comportment. With regard to the distinction between the signs and expression that are "given" and those "given off," respectively, the university teacher's work consists in an effort to control the audience's access to and perception of information so the signs consciously emitted will be interpreted by the audience as signs that are (unconsciously) revealed and therefore are an expression of that person's "true" identity (Fine & Manning, 2003, p. 46).

Goffman's dramaturgical analysis is concerned with situations of face-to-face interaction, and thus the core analytical unit is the social encounter. In everyday-life encounters, people are faced with various interactional tasks, and the most crucial task for participants in interaction, is to express and maintain a **definition of the situation**. By way of actions and gestures, participants unavoidably make suggestions as to how the situation is to be defined and thus as to how others are to perceive and treat them. As Goffman points out, usually the various situation definitions suggested by copresent participants will to a certain degree be in accord. However, this is

not to say that a total and complete consensus prevails but that the parties may repress sincere emotions and present a view of the situation the others are presumed to be willing to accept. Most everyday-life encounters, Goffman argues, involve a "modus vivendi" allowing each of the participants to make his or her own contribution to a common definition of the situation while at the same time agreeing to avoid open conflict (Goffman, 1959, p. 21). Thus, a fundamental interactional goal is to sustain a collectively shared definition of the situation enabling participants to decode normative expectations and to adjust behavior accordingly. As we shall see in Chapter 7, in his later works Goffman employed the concept of "frame" to describe the fact that actors automatically interpret social situations within significance-providing frames that guide their understanding and definition of what is going on as well as the identities of those participants present. According to Goffman (1974, p. 11), frames, thus, constitute "the principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them."

The definition of situations, thus, contains a moral component in the sense that individuals have a morally founded right to expect to be treated according to the social markers they implicitly or explicitly present. As Goffman contends,

> When an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. (Goffman, 1959, p. 24)

With the dramaturgical framework outlined in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman analyzed how individuals cooperate in an effort to sustain definitions of situations that preserve the "faces" of those participating. A person's face, in Goffman's terminology, is, as it may appear, not a question of mere physiognomy but a social and emotional construct. In the dramaturgical perspective, a person's face comprises the image the person conjures up of himself and others (usually) help him maintain. Among other things, the book describes the preventative measures taken in order to avoid embarrassing breakdowns—the "defensive practices" employed to protect one's own definitions and the "protective practices" used to save other people's definition of the situation—as well as the dramaturgical problems encountered by people when the actors of daily life engage in their craft in the presence of others (Goffman, 1959, pp. 24–26).

Unfolding the dramaturgical model, Goffman considers six fundamental dramaturgical elements: performances, teams, regions and region behavior, discrepant roles, communication out of character, and the art of impression management. Let's take a look at each of them in turn.

A "performance" is about making an impression on those present and notably about asserting (to oneself and to the other parties present) that we are who we pretend to be. In staging his performance, a person uses his expressive equipment (clothes, gender, position, etc.) in expressing his messages or situational claims. According to Goffman, performances may be subject to "idealization," suggesting that performers may be prone to provide the audience with an impression superior to what reality will verify. Goffman illustrated such idealization with tales of domestic Scottish performances, where "the average laird and his family lived far more frugally in the ordinary way than they did when they were entertaining visitors," this including situations where dinner served by five or six servants and all the adherent pomp and circumstance consisted of nothing but oatmeal and pickled herring in different guises (Goffman, 1959, p. 47). According to Goffman, performances are not always rendered by individual actors but sometimes collectively by several people together, by "teams" of actors. According to Goffman, (1959, p. 85), a team is "any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine." Thus, as we will explore in more detail in Chapter 5, the staff at a psychiatric hospital ward may be thought of as a team cooperating to sustain a medical-service definition of the situation that involves the idea of so-called rational-empirical treatment.

Everyday-life interaction is performed in various types of dramaturgical "**regions**," and in exploring the characteristics of these regions, Goffman presents his well-known distinction between the "scene" or the "front region" and the "back region." In much Goffman-inspired literature, these concepts are also referred to as **frontstage** and **backstage**. In the front region, Goffman contends, specific performances take place before an audience. Here, the performers play their roles and adjust their performances according to the prevailing normative structure. The back region is the area to which the performer can withdraw, providing the opportunity to relax, rehearse, and recharge. Particularly interesting situations are the transitions from the front region to the back region. By studying these transitions, Goffman argues, students may observe "a wonderful putting on and taking off character." Goffman provided an illustrative example from the works of British novelist George Orwell, who described how waiters change character by moving from the hotel kitchen to the dining room: "As he passes the door sudden change comes over him. The set of his shoulders alters; all the dirt and hurry irritation have dropped off in an instant. He glides over the carpet, with a solemn priest-like air" (Goffman, 1959, p. 123).

The fourth dramaturgical element, "discrepant roles," is concerned with how certain persons may "learn about the secrets of the team" and therefore may constitute "threats to their privileged position" (Goffman, 1959, p. 143). Gumshoes, snitches, or undercover field researchers are all immersed in discrepant roles, and therefore they constitute a potential risk for the entire team, which no longer is in full control of its own secrets. "Communication out of character" refers to those parts of the participants' expressions that are somehow incompatible with the impression that maintained during the course of interaction but that nonetheless always may be found in human encounters. Goffman uses this term to describe the fact that the performance of the moment does not constitute the only reality of the team members. They may, for instance, step aside from this reality and malign the audience ("treatment of the absent") or make use of secret and implied communication ("team collusion") even as the official performance unfolds. These discrepancies thus serve certain situational functions as they

> demonstrate that while a performer may act as if his response in a situation were immediate, unthinking and spontaneous, and while he himself may think this to be the case, still it will always be possible for situations to arise in which he will convey to one or two persons present the understanding that the show he is maintaining is only and merely a show. (Goffman, 1959, p. 168)

The final dramaturgical element, "impression management," designates the participants' efforts to control the impressions made during the course of interaction. The paramount aim of these efforts is to prevent embarrassing episodes or, eventually, situational breakdowns. The art of impression management involves, among other things, dramaturgical loyalty, dramaturgical discipline, and dramaturgical circumspection. Impression management, then, signifies how actors—through their utterances, body language, attire, and so forth—seek to gain control of the impression formed by the audience but also intimates the collaboration expected on the part of the audience, say, by ignoring or forgetting about a performer's slips, contradictions, and the like.

Viewed through the metaphor of **dramaturgy**, everyday-life face-to-face interactions emerge as continuous series of staged negotiations or exchanges. In Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, everyday-life performers must offer something fellow interactants will appreciate or reward. In other words, our presentations of self must be adapted to the situationally specific expectations formed by the participants and audiences present at any given time. Different situations have different adherent audiences and thus different expectations, which is why the self-images presented by everyday-life

performers need constantly to be adapted to the changing social situations. Thus, by interpreting everyday-life face-to-face encounters through the prism of dramaturgy, Goffman demonstrates how the social interactions of everyday life should not only be construed as a game of masks in which we deliberately seek to hoodwink each other but also as a functional process in which individuality and social order are united in an endless process of dramatization (Münch, 1986, p. 53).

Strategic Games

As it appears, Goffman's dramaturgical analysis touches upon the game-like character of everyday-life behavior. The staged performances and the elements of information and impression control all point to the strategic and calculating elements of face-to-face social interaction, and in his later writings, Goffman explored these strategic interactional issues in detail. His interest in the strategic elements of social behavior was influenced by the works of the game theoretician Thomas Schelling, with whom he spent a sabbatical year cultivating and integrating game-theory elements in his microsociological perspective. The strategic-game perspective is especially evident in the monographs *Encounters* (Goffman, 1961) and *Strategic Interaction* (Goffman, 1969) and in the essay "Where the Action Is" (Goffman, 1967). The first part of *Strategic Interaction* is concerned with "expression games." This particular type of game involves situations in which individuals, or players, as Goffman calls them, reciprocally seek to decode and manipulate the information about themselves available in the microsocial world of the encounter:

> There will be situations where an observer is dependent on what he can learn from a subject, there being no sufficient alternate sources of information, and the subject will be orientated to frustrate this assessment or facilitate it under difficult circumstances. Under these conditions gamelike considerations develop even though very serious matters may be at stake. (Goffman, 1969, p. 10)

In order to maximize individual gain and advantage, the players in these microworlds make use of certain interactional moves, of which the basic ones are: "the unwitting move," "the naïve move," "the control move," "the uncovering move," and the "counter-uncovering move" (Goffman, 1969, pp. 11–28). Players in situated activity systems are thus involved in various types of strategic behavior (planning moves and teasing out and assessing information) within the constraints of a situational normative or moral

structure. Stressing the importance of rules, Goffman indicates that however strategic or manipulative players may seem, they act within a set of norms that influences their moves. Players may thus act strategically to enhance the perception of them as rule-following individuals. Engaging in expression games, however, individuals may appear as everyday-life agents:

> In every social situation we can find a sense in which one participant will be an observer with something to gain from assessing expressions, and another will be a subject with something to gain from manipulating this process. A single structure of contingencies can be found in this regard which renders agents a little like us all and all of us a little like agents. (Goffman, 1969, p. 81)

In the second essay, titled *Strategic Interaction*, Goffman is seemingly not as interested in how we reveal, expose, or manipulate information but is more concerned with how we strategically plan and execute our actions in the most rational manner. Here he seeks to identify the different aspects the strategic player must take into consideration when he or she wants to plan actions in the most rational way, involving the situational counterpart and the situation itself. In this context, the most rational behavior means behavioral moves that lead to the highest degree of personal gain meaning maximizing social recognition. First, players may evaluate "the other's moves." Here, the objective is to analyze the counterpart's potential motives and possible alternate moves. Next, the player should observe "the operational code," that is, the counterpart's way of playing the game: his or her style of playing and goals. Third, actors must assess "the opponent's resolve" meaning an assessment of the counterpart's determination and ability to continue the game despite personal costs. Further, the actors need to take "the other's information state" into account. Any potential move must be built up around the counterpart's thoughts/knowledge. Finally, interacting parties need to take into account "the opponent's resources." It is important to know about the possible aids the counterpart (and the actor him/herself) have at their disposal when making the next move (Goffman, 1969, pp. 94–96). Phrased differently, the individual player must take several things into consideration when planning and executing the most rational actions. The player must make the necessary calculations concerning the other players in the game and, based on these calculations, must make the requisite moves. However, the characteristic feature of this game is that while player A tries to see through player B's motives, intentions, resources, and stockpile of information, player B is all the while simultaneously attempting to discern A's motives, intentions, and so on. Based on this, Goffman claims that strategic interaction is when persons

find themselves in a well-structured situation of mutual impingement where each party must make a move and where every possible move carries fateful implications for all of the parties. In this situation, each player must influence his own decision by his knowing that the other players are likely to try to dope out his decision in advance. . . . An exchange of moves made on the basis of this kind of orientation to self and others can be called strategic interaction. (Goffman, 1969, pp. 100–101)

In other words, as participants in the game, we are at the mercy of the same game based on our *mutual assessment*. This ongoing surveillance is reciprocal, and thus the power being exerted in people's interaction is in a certain sense democratic, since the surveillance is a two-way street, so to speak. Goffman stresses that we enter into a type of shared destiny during everyday interactions in which our "moves" entail consequences not only for ourselves but for the other players as well. Our ability to act rationally and thus strategically maximize our own gains pointedly depends on our ability to assess and predict the thoughts and actions of the other persons involved. But following George Herbert Mead, strategic interaction also comprises gaining influence on the situation by putting ourselves in the others' place and making use of this knowledge in planning our own moves.

In the essay "Where the Action Is," included in *Interaction Ritual* (1967), Goffman similarly analyzes social interaction through the game metaphor. His point of departure is the concept of "action," referring here to the often problematic chance- or risk-involving activities initiated for the sake of entertainment or excitement. Goffman's concept of action refers to those moments in which people, similar to casino gamblers, throw themselves into the game, place their bets, and reap their rewards or suffer their losses. Although modern everyday life does not present the same obvious physical elements of danger or risk as in earlier, precivilized ages, this life is not, in Goffman's view, totally devoid of risk. Human encounters and social situations may be momentous and dangerous games in the sense that we may both win (receive praise, recognition, dignity) and lose (become embarrassed, lose face or composure). Hence Goffman is not interested in the situations, activities, and contexts that directly and quite patently appeal to the human thirst for excitement and taking risks, such as the aforementioned casino, racetracks, parachuting, mountaineering, and the like. His interest lies in the action revolving around human nature or the human ability to display self-control and dignity, often in the face of stress and momentous "fatal" situations. As Goffman sees it, our studies of situations of everyday interaction can lead us to pinpoint the so-called **character contests**—for example, the little social games, battles, or disputes we now and then "fight

out" with each other and that are about demonstrating self-control and a strong character at the other's expense. Everyday life provides many opportunities for fighting such battles:

> Whenever individuals ask for or give excuses, proffer or receive compliments, slight another or are slighted, a contest of self-control can result. Similarly, the tacit little flirtations occurring between friends and between strangers produce a contest of unavailability. (Goffman, 1967, p. 240)

Thus, the character contest is Goffman's term for situations in which we, as a result of modern life's lack of palpable danger and excitement, embark on risk-laden behavior in relation to other people for the purpose of adding value to our own character. Some people engage in this type of transaction more than others; some will indefatigably burst into heated remonstrations in the face of all their potential character-related losses and winnings. Yet, if you manage to maintain a clear head and carry yourself with a certain dignity, chances are you may win something; needless to say, if you lose composure or display signs of weakness, the risk of losing is imminent.

As we have briefly touched upon, it should be emphasized that when Goffman speaks of strategic interaction and employs the game metaphor in relation to social life (Goffman, 1969, pp. 113–114), he is well aware that empirical reality rarely presents us with such "pure games." Everyday games play out within the framework of constraining as well as opportunity-laden social norms. Thus, in "Where the Action Is" (1967), Goffman points to how character contests will only surface periodically, because people in everyday life fundamentally desire to sustain peace and ritual order. A crucial point made by Goffman is that it is the definition of the situation that orchestrates how players are expected to comport themselves and that this definition thus has a moral component in the sense that those participating have a right to be appreciated according to the social indicators they presume to possess. In this way there is an implicit coercion, often with a moral slant, involved in the situation. It is the definition of the situation that regulates how we are to act, which roles we should play, and what demeanor we should assume. So while players constantly make strategic deliberations in focused interactions, and while they sometimes act in a calculating manner in order to gain "character winnings," and while there may well be ongoing mutual surveillance or spying, all these efforts are made within a framework involving situational moral norms. This leads us to another central theme in Goffman's writings, namely the social and moral ritualization of everyday life interaction.

Interaction Rituals

In Chapter 2, we explored how Goffman found inspiration in the works of Émile Durkheim. This inspiration is evident as early as in his PhD dissertation, in which he observes the neglectful treatment sociology has afforded to the ritual aspects of interaction:

> The ritual model for interaction has been poorly treated in the literature, perhaps because of the stress given by G. H. Mead and by Weber to the fact that a social relationship, and hence social interaction, was a product of two persons taking each other's actions into consideration in pursuing their own action. This stress seems to have given an instrumental flavour to our thinking about the kinds of consideration we show in regard to others: the implication is that we take into consideration the actions of others (the better to achieve our personal ends, whatever these may be) and not so much that we give consideration to others. By "consideration" we have come to mean calculation, not considerateness. (Goffman, 1953b, p. 103)

In Durkheim's sociology of religion, Goffman found important theoretical components with which to build a perspective on social interaction emphasizing the ritual solicitude and respect displayed toward other people as "sacred objects." This line of thinking is also quite clear in the dramaturgical analysis; however, it is expressed in its clearest and most explicit form in Goffman's analyses of the so-called **interaction rituals** of everyday life (Goffman, 1967). In his essay "On Face Work," Goffman rationalizes the use of the ritual concept:

> I use the term *ritual* because I am dealing with acts through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it. . . . One's face, then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is therefore a ritual one. (Goffman, 1967, p. 19)

The interaction rituals identified by Goffman are to be construed as a form of rules or "situational proprieties" (Goffman, 1963, p. 24) applying to everyday life interaction, manifesting themselves in stereotypical behavioral sequences and patterns of speech. Among the ways through which they express themselves are the small and seemingly insignificant courtesies that we daily extend to each other. Goffman (1967, p. 47) expands further on Durkheim's conception of the sanctity of the soul and thus claims that the faces of modern individuals have a kind of sacred character. This sanctity must be protected, affirmed, and maintained, and we do this, Goffman points out, by observing certain apparently insignificant interaction rituals.

Thus, by employing the concept of ritual, Goffman indicates that many of the interactions of everyday life are indeed symbolic actions aiming at endorsing individuals' faces and, thus, the microsocial reality of the social encounter. By treating each other with respect and dignity, by turning away our attention whenever others are about to lose face, in short, by engaging in "face work," we are actually protecting each other and the social reality involving us. It is the observance of this ritual collaboration, these many and varied interaction rituals, that makes Goffman assert that the individual, in modern society, has taken the place of the gods. As Goffman points out, many gods have disappeared, "but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance" (Goffman, 1967, p. 95). However, it is not people's uniqueness or individuality that is celebrated in the interaction rituals of everyday life. Rather, what is venerated is their commonality, that which they share and have in common; and it is through his analysis of the microscopic celebrations of commonality in everyday life that Goffman demonstrates how society's social order and structures are continually being reproduced (Album, 1996, p. 133). Hence, among Goffman's notable achievements is to have focused our attention on the significant rituals of everyday interaction. He demonstrated how, on the micro-level, these rituals are part of what ensures decent (and rule-following) social intercourse and how, on a global level, they form part of the *glue* maintaining societal cohesion.

Goffman was not interested in the interaction rituals that express themselves as explicit and verbalized injunctions or prohibitions but in those that come in the form of more or less unpremeditated ways of treating one another in everyday life encounters. In *Behavior in Public Places* (1963), Goffman explored the situational proprieties in "unfocused" and "focused interactions." In unfocused interaction, which is the dominating form in most public places, people are copresent without being mutually engaged in a shared activity, while in focused interaction people are gathered in and collaborate to sustain a shared focus of attention. A primary interactional task in unfocused interaction is to display a proper level of involvement, and here the body plays an important part. In unfocused interaction, people interpret and assess each other's behavior by way of a "body idiom," as there is "an obligation to convey certain information when in the presence of others and an obligation not to convey other impressions just as there is an expectation that others will present themselves in a certain way" (Goffman, 1963, p. 35). Exploring the dimensions of the body idiom, Goffman uses the term "body gloss" to describe the ways that individuals use their bodies to make otherwise unavailable things visible to others, and he identifies various subtypes of this body idiom. One such subtype is "orientation gloss," designating the behaviors that signal to others that we are engaged in normal and harmless everyday actions.

For example, when a person is standing in front of an office building, he may check his mobile phone or watch from time to time, displaying that he is engaged in waiting for someone and thus not engaged in another, suspicious activity. By performing body gloss, then, individuals can free themselves from undesirable characterological implications of their ongoing behavior (Goffman, 1971, pp. 128–129). Thus by managing the body according to the situational standards and by judging others' behavior through the body idiom, unacquainted people in unfocused interactions contribute to the orderliness and predictability in everyday life social interactions. Signaling proper involvement in the situation constitutes an important element of the body idiom. However, since a person's involvement is a cognitive or a mental state and thus is not directly observable, the level of his involvement is observed by others by perceiving indicators of his situational involvement. People, then, may use "involvement shields" to cover behaviors that signal improper situational involvement such as when hands "are used to cover closed eyes that are obliged to be open, and newspapers to cover mouths that should not be open in a yawn" (Goffman, 1963, p. 40). Furthermore, people need to allocate proper levels of attention to "main" and "side involvements," as when people sing or smoke while performing their work. Social situations, Goffman claims, prescribe what is to be perceived as the "dominant involvement" and thus what participants are supposed to engage properly in. Subordinate involvement, then, is the attention that the individual can pay to other activities while still respecting the dominant involvement:

> Thus, while waiting to see an official, an individual may converse with a friend, read a magazine, or doodle with a pencil, sustaining these engrossing claims on attention only until his turn is called, when he is obliged to put aside his time-passing activity though it is unfinished. (Goffman, 1963, p. 44)

In focused interaction, there is a shared mutual focus of attention; however, this is not always visible. In fact, Goffman demonstrated that although many everyday-life situations seem uncoordinated and without a shared focus of attention, this is often not the case. When passing strangers on the street, people usually glance downward or elsewhere before getting too close so as not to invade the other's personal space. Seemingly, no coordination or mutual focus is involved. Taking a closer look, however, the opposite might be the case:

> What seems to be involved is that one gives to another enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other is present (and that one admits openly to having seen him), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from him so as to express that he does not constitute a target of special

curiosity or design. In performing this courtesy the eyes of the looker may pass over the eyes of the other, but no "recognition" is typically allowed. When the courtesy is performed between two persons passing on the street, civil inattention may take the special form of eyeing the other up to approximately eight feet, during which time sides of the street are apportioned by gesture, and then casting the eyes down as the other passes—a kind of dimming of lights. (Goffman, 1963, p. 84)

According to Goffman, this interaction ritual may be the most overlooked, yet it is nonetheless a ritual constantly regulating the social interaction of human beings (Goffman, 1963, p. 84). **Civil inattention**, then, is an example of interaction with a minimum of mutual focus. As the example indicates, interaction rituals are to a large extent directed at showing the other person respect. The goal is to avoid intrusion and thus an invasion of the other's right to a private life. Differently put, the rituals ensure protection for the individual, but they are also part of what regulates the way we enter into relations with one another. In this context, Goffman (1963, p. 92) speaks about "opening moves" and "clearance signs," thereby referring to the different ways (typically by glances) we ask for contact and signal that we are available to each other. There are also rituals hinging upon the respect with which we should introduce ourselves. Because it is not enough to display respect for others, in order to receive the necessary recognition and acceptance from others, you must also be able to comport yourself in a respectful manner. In Goffman's analysis, we are interconnected through the interaction rituals whereby we respect, sustain, and acknowledge the images or faces that we present to one another. As has been mentioned, the rituals primarily involve protecting and caring for each other's faces; on a more general level, the ritual obligations serve to maintain a moral order.

By exploring how interaction rituals serve such face-saving purposes, Goffman's work was pioneering in integrating feelings into sociological theory. Thus, in the essay "Embarrassment and Social Organization," Goffman (1967) analyzed how social interaction strives to avoid the embarrassment that arises whenever an individual's self is threatened or discredited. In social encounters, individuals are expected to project a self that is suitable for the occasion into the interaction through the "expressive implications of his stream of conduct." More or less consciously, individuals will thus project a self into social situations, and the other players' contribution to that social situation is, according to Goffman, attuned to and composed of the demands thus projected. In everyday-life interaction, individuals will attempt to avoid the threat of embarrassment and, consequently, most people seek to avoid situations that threaten their own projected self as well as the

self that is projected by the other players. This may be achieved by projecting relatively modest self-claims into the interaction and not overplaying one's hand, so to speak. It may also be done by deliberately charting a course skirting potentially dangerous situations and, finally, by showing consideration or tactful tolerance toward others. However, situations may arise in which certain events raise serious doubts as to the claims an individual has put forward concerning his or her self. The situation is then disrupted because the presuppositions on which it rested are seemingly no longer valid. These individuals therefore feel shame or embarrassment. As Goffman sees it, such feelings not only perturb the person whose self has been threatened. Often the confidence in whoever pretends to be tactful but actually causes the other person to lose face is weakened far more than trust in the person who is at first discredited.

People may also become embarrassed and flustered when persons who do not usually interact informally suddenly find themselves in situations in which the option of informal discussion cannot be ignored. When the cleaning lady and the CEO meet in the elevator, they may experience an awkward moment because, in adapting to this moment's demands, they have to, in a manner of speaking, abandon their usual roles. They may attempt to meet each other in an informal chat, but both may also feel uneasy at the situation because they have to "sacrifice" their roles. In such moments, Goffman identifies the social function of embarrassment. He points out that embarrassment it is not an irrational impulse but forms part of a group of actions that may seem spontaneous but are no less mandatory than the other, conscious acts that contribute to maintaining the social structure. Had the CEO in the elevator encounter insisted on his superior right to recognition—adhering to the principle that the nature of the work done determines a person's status—and had the cleaning lady on her part demanded an equal status according to the principle that belonging to the firm entitles you to such equal treatment, then the conflict between two opposite social principles of organization would have been expressed openly in the situation. But because both parties become embarrassed and thus temporarily sacrifice themselves, Goffman notes that "only" they and the ongoing social encounter are compromised. Thus, the individuals' embarrassment serves a specific function: In the example, it contributes to the maintenance or protection of the social structure as it prevents that inevitable clash between the organizational principles of different systems that are expressed too manifestly in the social encounter. As Goffman comments at the end of the essay, "Social structure gains elasticity; the individual merely loses composure" (Goffman, 1967, p. 112).

Besides describing and analyzing the microscopic interaction rituals and emotionology of everyday life, Goffman also developed a wide range of

conceptual classifications and taxonomies. From Durkheim, Goffman (1967, p. 73) adopted the fundamental differentiation between positive and negative rituals. According to Durkheim, positive rituals are a kind of mandatory rules prescribing preferred modes of behavior, while the negative rituals are overt prohibitions or taboos. Goffman rephrased these concepts into "presentational rituals" that "encompass acts through which the individual makes specific attestations to recipients concerning how he regards them and how he will treat them in the on-coming interaction" (Goffman, 1967, p. 71). According to Goffman (1971), one type of positive ritual is so-called "supportive interchanges," such as the minor actions and behavioral patterns with which individuals display respect and courtesy toward others and that primarily revolve around preventing interactional crises or "ritual imbalance." Goffman calls the negative rituals "avoidance rituals," and they primarily concern keeping others at a distance and avoiding violation of what Simmel might have called people's "ideal sphere" (Goffman, 1967, p. 62). The pedestrians performing civil inattention in the quote in which they "dim the lights" are thus participants involved in an avoidance ritual aimed at mutually respecting each other's ideal sphere.

Of course, interactions in everyday life do not unfold without breakdowns, awkwardness, embarrassment, violations, and crises. Everyday life involves situations in which individual faces are violated to a degree, making it awkward or unbearable for the violated individual as well as for the other participants. Such situations call for what Goffman calls "remedial interchanges." Remedial interchanges are sequences of behavior or procedures that help people to repossess lost faces and thus reestablish the situation as a whole. The individual responsible for the violation or crisis may be confronted with negative sanctions explicitly and directly. In case of minor violations, situations may be repaired through imperceptibly directing the common attention focus of all participants in other directions. If the violation cannot be ignored, the general rule is that the violator is given the chance to make good on the damage. Through remedial rituals, he or she will offer compensation to the violated party as well as to the overall situation. This may be through an explicit and public apology. In so doing, not only will the violated individual and the overall situation be provided with compensation and repair; if the compensation is recognized, the violator (who in fact may have violated himself) also restores his self.

Goffman was particularly concerned with the positive, motivational, and supportive rituals. To him, the social interactions of everyday life are not an ongoing, comforting, and unproblematic process that participants may enter into risk free. A number of potential threats and dangers lurk in social interactions of everyday life, and they demand constant attention (Burns, 1992, p. 26).

The main part of the interaction rituals that Goffman identified emphasized how this fragile order unremittingly has to be repaired and maintained. In various ways, then, the interaction rituals contribute toward facilitating social interaction. As has been mentioned, there are rituals that contribute to soliciting togetherness and semaphore availability (Goffman, 1963, 1971). Similarly, there are rituals for "closure;" there are rituals for repairing broken-down situations (Goffman, 1971); and there are conversation-regulating rituals (Goffman, 1981a). Thus, by focusing on the everyday ceremonials, Goffman demonstrated how, in everyday social encounters, we make a certain sacrifice or pay a particular price for ensuring the problem-free proceedings of that encounter and interaction (Album, 1996, p. 133). This sacrifice or price is our humble and decent behavior, our display of a respectable and comprehensible personality. In return for making this sacrifice, we may expect a certain amount of security, interpersonal trust, and social recognition.

Conclusion

Anthony Giddens (1987) once asked whether Goffman should be considered a systematic social theorist. As did Giddens, we would not hesitate to answer in the affirmative. Although his overall theoretical model may be hard to discern due to his innovative writing style (Collins, 2004, p. 22), Goffman developed, through his studies of everyday-life behavior, a theory of interaction among copresent individuals, and one of his major achievements was the exploration and identification of an "interaction order" with its specific elements and entities. So although Goffman once insisted—perhaps teasingly—that his writings did not provide any concepts for the study of everyday life (Goffman, 1983c), this chapter has shown that he in fact did develop a substantial and comprehensive arsenal of relevant and useful concepts for studying and understanding everyday situations.

Summing up this chapter, it has demonstrated that Goffman's analysis of the ritualized unfolding of our face-to-face interactions and the elements of performance and deception should be viewed in a context involving efforts to sketch the outline of a so-called interaction order. Drawing the contours of this order, Goffman performed metaphorical redescriptions of everyday-life face-to-face encounters. These redescriptions revealed both "the promissory, evidential character" and the "social ritualization" of social life as well as the game-like character of social life, enabling actors to block or even misdirect the revealment of an individual's purpose or intent (Goffman, 1983a, p. 3). The interaction order is the order that exists in

socially situated interactions among copresent parties. The orderliness of this order is "predicated on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints" (Goffman, 1983a, p. 5). Each of Goffman's analytic metaphors has highlighted important aspects of this order. The analysis of interactional behavior in public places explored how embodied information flows and governs much of our public behavior. The dramaturgical and game metaphor illustrated the deception-like character of everyday-life self-presentations and thus how we purposely give or unwillingly give off information about ourselves, while the ritual metaphor emphasized the elements of trust and moral engagement underlying everyday social behavior. It is thus important to note that by employing a variety of analytic metaphors, Goffman did not portray everyday life interaction as merely performative, strategic, or morally ritualized. Each of Goffman's metaphors reveals simultaneously existing layers of the complexities of modern social life. The dramaturgic, game-like, and ritualized interchanges are thus to be perceived as three sides of the same thing: the maintenance and production of a social order by way of performances and strategic moves that serve to uphold social situations as well as the perception of the performers as reliable members of a morally grounded interaction order. In the interaction order, strategic and calculative behavior coexists with a system of constraining interaction rituals. As Goffman points out toward the end of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, people follow moral standards because of their social nature. However, as performers, they are "concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized" (Goffman, 1959, p. 251). Before we move on to Goffman's sociology of deviance, we offer a few questions for further thought.

Questions

- How valid is Erving Goffman's claim that the "interaction order" should be treated as a domain in its own right?
- How accurate is Erving Goffman's analysis of the dramaturgic, game-like, and ritual aspects of social life?
- How relevant is Erving Goffman's description of the processes, elements, and structures of the interaction order to understanding today's digitized and virtual interaction?
- In what ways is contemporary everyday-life sociology indebted to the works of Erving Goffman?