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Erving Goffman

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Biographical Introduction

Erving Goffman (1922–1982) has been described as ‘the most influential sociologist of the twentieth century’¹ and is, according to the March 2009 edition of *The Times Higher Education Guide*,² one of the six most cited authors in the Humanities, after Anthony Giddens (1938-) and before Jürgen Habermas (1929-). Born in Mannville, Alberta, Canada in 1922, the son of Ukrainian Jewish immigrant parents, Goffman may not, on first impression, immediately conjure up thoughts of dialogue. However, in introducing his work in this chapter, I hope to show how, in his exposition of face-to-face interaction (in what he called the ‘Interaction Order’³), and in the field that has broadly become known as the ‘Sociology of the Everyday’ it is possible to find significant and creative resources for the theory and practice of dialogue.

As a child between the two World Wars, Goffman’s life moved from rural to urban areas in Manitoba Canada following rail expansion, and in so doing exposed him to discrimination, both in relation to himself and also in relation to his Jewish family and community⁴. As a young person both he and his sister⁵ (who later became a well-known actress) acted out school performances, and during that formative experience sowed the seeds for his ideas about ‘dramaturgy’, which would later find academic and popular acclaim and, it is argued in this chapter, can itself also contribute to the theory and practice of dialogue. Cavan points out the importance of Goffman’s work, ‘not in inventing the language of dramaturgy but in developing the theatrical metaphor as a method of describing social life, a metaphor that made visible what had before been obscure.’⁶

The complicated relationship Goffman had with his Jewish identity involved a reluctance to embrace it. Moreover, in marrying an Episcopalian Christian, he moved from an ‘outsider’ to Canadian culture to an ‘insider’. He distanced himself from family and former friends as he embarked upon an academic pathway. By doing so he created a seemingly happy isolation from the culturally normative world of his upbringing in the ‘Yiddish-speaking enclave’⁷ of Winnipeg and among the small town bigots of Dauphin. Cavan suggests, however, that it was in his early years that his interest in ‘stigma’ was also developed, ‘showing how stigmatizing circumstances can discredit claims to identity, and suggesting how impression management helps mitigate the discrepancy between a person’s real life circumstances and prevailing cultural ideas.’⁸

Goffman’s rise to sociological fame took him from relative obscurity as he moved to Chicago to become a postgraduate. Having completed his PhD on ‘Communication Conduct’ in the

¹ Gary Alan Fine and Philip Manning, ‘Erving Goffman’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists* ed. George Ritzer (London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2003).

² The Times Higher Education Guide, 26th March 2009, accessed 20th June 2014
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/405956.article>.

³ Erving Goffman, *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*, unpublished PhD thesis, Dept. of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1953; Erving Goffman, ‘The Interaction Order,’ *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 1-17.

⁴ Yves Winkin, ‘What is Life? The uneasy making of an intellectual biography,’ in *Goffman and Sociological Organization: Studies in a sociological legacy* ed. Greg Smith (London: Routledge, 1999), 19.

⁵ Frances Bay, *nee* Goffman became a Hollywood and Television actress.

⁶ Sherri Cavan, ‘When Erving Goffman was a Boy: The Formative Years of a Sociological Giant,’ *Symbolic Interaction* 37, no. 1 (2014): 59.

⁷ Cavan, ‘When Erving Goffman was a Boy,’ 58.

⁸ Cavan, ‘When Erving Goffman was a Boy,’ 41.

Shetland Isles, he moved to The Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda (as a visiting scientist), where he stayed for three years. From there he moved to University of California, Berkeley and a full professorship, arriving at Berkeley in 1958 and achieving the chair by 1962. The University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia and the position of Benjamin Franklyn Professor of Sociology and Anthropology followed in 1968. The journey however was rarely smooth, as his unorthodox observational ethnography often courted controversy. Nonetheless, despite his seeming non-conformity his eventual nomination to, and acceptance of, the presidency of the American Sociological Association shortly before his untimely death from stomach cancer in 1982 is a mark of the position of esteem that he eventually achieved among his colleagues and peers.

Thought on Dialogue

Goffman's work, unlike that of other thinkers in this volume, is not directly inspired by 'dialogue' as a mode of communication which many assert seeks mutual understanding as its rationale.⁹ Nevertheless, he offers the theory and practice of dialogue a number of valuable insights, notably in his study of human interaction. This is premised on face-to-face encounter/engagement, which he examines across a range of social settings: in public and private, in one-to-one and group interaction and in its relationship to what he describes as the 'Interaction Order'.¹⁰ Goffman was not unaware of the consequences of his work for the study of dialogue. But the language he uses, as well as the seemingly infinite detailed description and analysis of how interaction takes place, is in many respects of his own making. Graumann¹¹ acknowledges Goffman's commitment throughout his work to 'social interaction and interdependence' and agrees that to consider his contribution to dialogue one must 'concentrate on Goffman's *interpersonal rituals*, which he [Goffman] described as having a "dialogistic character".'

Much of Goffman's work explains the nature of social life and interaction using three metaphors: drama, ritual and game. The game metaphor is often seen as addressing the human capacity for manipulation and one-upmanship, while the ritual metaphor explores the maintenance of morality and social order. The different positions individuals take in interaction with each other, Goffman sees as being imposed as much by the situational activity one finds oneself embracing, as that of the individual's own attributes of personality, emotion or cognition. Out of these situations individual or group roles are offered or expected, and the ritual aspects for those involved in interaction are used to maintain the social order, of which dialogue is a part.

The drama metaphor applies to both morality and manipulation and depends on whether one sees Goffman's conception of social life as moral or manipulative.¹² I would like to suggest, as does Branaman, that morality for Goffman 'is affirmed in the everyday-life interaction rituals' (something we will explore later in the chapter). Goffman's description of social life identifies the interplay between manipulation of information and risks associated with loss of face or gaining face and the morality informed by respect for the social order, which sustains the *status quo*.

It is in his model of theatrical performance (or dramaturgy) that Goffman examines how he believes individuals attempt to control the impressions others receive of them. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (a seminal text) concerns itself with the dualistic self of much of his early work. This is a self who is socially constructed and yet is described as the 'self-as-performer' on the one hand and the 'self-as-character' on the other. The former involves the attributes of mind, emotions and impulses that experience pride and shame and motivates him/her to perform for others and to safeguard against embarrassment. But it is the 'self-as-character', out of which the socialised self, as Goffman sees it, emerges.¹³

As dialogue in normative form seeks authenticity of self and/or spirit in its desire for mutuality, there is for Goffman a continuity of life outside the role performed. Whether real or contrived, the performance and the person are equally socially defined (including the continuous self as

⁹ Paul Weller, preface to *Dialogue Theories*, by Frances Sleaf and Omer Sener, ed. Paul Weller (London: Dialogue Society, 2013).

¹⁰ Goffman, 'The Interaction Order,' 1-17.

¹¹ Carl F. Graumann, 'Commonality, Mutuality, Reciprocity: a conceptual introduction,' in *Mutualities in Dialogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

¹² Ann Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' in *The Goffman Reader*, ed. Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1997), xlv – lxxxii.

¹³ Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' xlviii.

character). Those impressions we convey and the techniques adopted to deploy them are part of the scenes that are presented. Goffman describes such scenes as acted out in 'front regions' or 'back region', the former essentially a public performance with one or more persons 'who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation,' the latter more in keeping with the privacy of back-stage where, 'the performance of a routine is prepared'¹⁴ or a closed environment where only personal relationships, for example in the home, are contemplated. Dramaturgy addresses what Goffman describes as 'dramaturgical principles', which include: 'performances, teams, regions, discrepant roles, communication out of character and impression management.'¹⁵ These terms reflect what Goffman sees as a range of characteristics associated with individual and collective performances in front or back regions, including the presentation of inconsistent or differing roles outside of others' expectations, which he links to language expressed as 'out of character' for a given individual. He also refers to how one manages one's impression of self and others with whom we are connected, socially and/or emotionally.

This is not to say that Goffman wants to 'characterize social life as a realm of manipulative play-acting in which morality plays no role'; on the contrary, he agrees that the social order encourages moral standards, which individuals seek to uphold as described above. In attempting to do so it is often the case that the moral issues of upholding standards are superseded by, 'the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized.'¹⁶ The performance metaphor therefore raises the question of authenticity in dialogue and does not allow those who encounter each other to sanitise the process but rather open it up for scrutiny, something that is essential to mutual understanding.

A working definition of dialogue cannot be found in Goffman's work, but consideration of how to understand dialogue from a dramaturgical perspective is reflected in the writing of other authors. For example, Peter Westoby identified the likely focus of people considering dialogue from a dramaturgical perspective by suggesting:

a dramaturgical perspective would focus on the performance of dialogue – how practitioners embody dialogue in particular settings and contexts, also with awareness of settings and contexts whereby such dialogical performance is probably difficult, if not impossible...¹⁷

It may help to add to Westoby's comments, that the performance of dialogue involves a mutuality, where understanding, however partial, contingent and situationally constructed seeks affirmation through the social order.

Goffman's appraisal of the ritual detail involved in any given human interaction can help us study and analyse what is going on in dialogue, and can in addition bring insights through which we can more sensitively adjust interactional practices, rules and rituals to favour the aims of dialogue, in its necessity to meet the other, in its desire to understand the other and in its potential to provide a meaning making process through which a more honest encounter with the other becomes a reality.

There are thus a number of key strands in Goffman's thought that can shape our thinking about dialogue - specifically, in his analysis of social interaction generally, and especially in relation to 'spoken interaction' within the 'taken-for-granted'.¹⁸ Goffman considers not only the minutiae of how interactions are structured and proceed, but also how the interior dialogue of

¹⁴ Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' xxiv.

¹⁵ Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' lxiv.

¹⁶ Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' lxxvii.

¹⁷ Peter Westoby, 'Theorising Dialogue for Community Development Practice – An Exploration of Crucial Thinkers,' *Journal of Dialogue Studies*, 2, no. 1 (2014): 70.

¹⁸ Branaman, 'Goffman's Social Theory,' lxiv.

individuals is analytically apprehended and how it is associated with what is described as 'attunement'.¹⁹ Individuals who are attuned are those where 'the degree of social connectedness, of accurately taking the viewpoint of the other without judging it,' is presented as being involved in a form of 'mystic union'.²⁰ He is referring to a situation where two or more individuals share a common understanding of the situation they are in. It is this understanding of the situation, mutually recognised, which forms that which is taken-for-granted. For example, when engaged in dialogue 'an understanding will prevail [among the speakers] as to how long and how frequently each speaker is to hold the floor...'²¹ Attunement appears as an ideal of dialogic interaction, where communication is guided by and steeped in mutual understanding, based on the sense of connection and the interdependence of those in interaction and dialogue seeking a mutually acceptable outcome.

Goffman examines the requirement to accept some common presuppositions if interaction and ultimately dialogue is to be seen as a successful form of communication. Commonalities include what might appear to be obvious, but is nonetheless essential - in other words 'the commonality of everyday knowledge'²². It is this stock of knowledge through which individuals are attuned.

Goffman acknowledges the importance of rules of reciprocity for the initiation and maintenance of social interaction.²³ He talks about a process of 'reciprocal ratification'.²⁴ through which participants in interaction provide each other with accreditation that legitimates them in the process. He considers conversations as situationally and socially constructed and involving a system of practices, conventions and procedural rules, which reinforce the taken-for-granted. Through this, for example, participants recognise where it is permissible to 'initiate talk'. Goffman offers a complex definition of 'being in a state of talk', thus:

that is they have declared themselves officially open to one another for purposes of spoken communication and guarantee together to maintain a flow of words. A set of significant gestures is also employed by which one or more new participants can officially join the talk, by which one or more accredited participants can officially withdraw, and by which the state of talk can be terminated.²⁵

In a kind of dialogue aiming at mutual understanding we might expect people to make a more conscious effort at what Goffman calls 'reciprocal ratification' as they seek to ensure everyone feels able to participate. An awareness of Goffman's work might sharpen the instinct to pay attention to this subtle conversational ritual, which he goes on to discuss in relation to the rules governing interaction in which 'talk' is the medium of verbal communication and associated gestures legitimate each participant.

Goffman acknowledges a fundamental condition in an episode or unit of interaction as having 'a particular ethos or emotional atmosphere'.²⁶ This is an important consideration as it reflects the emotional impact that interaction and therefore dialogue holds for participants and underlines the shared awareness associated with inter-subjectivity. Goffman insists that such

¹⁹ Thomas J. Scheff, *Looking Glass Selves: the Cooley/Goffman conjecture* (2003), accessed 20th June 2014, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/19a.pdf>

²⁰ Thomas J. Scheff, *Looking Glass Selves*, accessed 20th June 2014, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/19a.pdf>

²¹ Thomas J. Scheff, *Looking Glass Selves*, accessed 20th June 2014, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/19a.pdf>

²² Graumann, 'Commonality, Mutuality, Reciprocity,' 14.

²³ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* (Harmondsworth: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1972), 34.

²⁴ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 34.

²⁵ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 34-35.

²⁶ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 35.

interaction should be pursued with 'ritual care' and in the event of a contribution which endangers the 'ritual equilibrium', someone should show that the message received is not acceptable to those present. Individuals ought to conduct themselves appropriately in a given situation where the symbolic meaning of their acts, against the self-images presented, should be sustained. For Goffman, a regard for one's self-image as understood by self and other is an essential part of the ritual code, as is the necessity to avoid embarrassing oneself or another participant in the interaction or interchange, and to be aware of impression management associated with potentially saving face.

People who adopt particular face saving approaches often habitualise them and they can become standardised and repetitive; this helps facilitators/practitioners recognise their stance. Individuals, subcultures and societies seem to have their own repertoire of face saving practices. To recognise these is to deploy perceptiveness as a practitioner, as we are asked to be aware of face saving practices in everyday encounter outside of dialogue, and should use the interpretation we have of these practices in support of dialogue. Do we recognise what methods practitioners are using? Do we see our own defensiveness regarding saving face or our protectiveness in saving the face of others?

'Face Work' adopts two methods to manage face saving in dialogue and/or interaction: 1) 'the avoidance process' – manifest by avoiding contact in which these threats are possible. It can include the use of intermediaries or a voluntary gracious withdrawal, and is often associated with defensive manoeuvres, for example, changing the topic of conversation or deliberately staying off topic. Protective aspects include: politeness, discretion, replies with careful ambiguity, extended courtesies, and forewarning of potentially challenging acts or questions.²⁷ 2) 'the corrective process' – when in dialogue an incident occurs which is expressively incompatible with judgements of social worth, and is unavoidable, it will be ratified and given status as an incident of which the effects can be ameliorated by deliberate correction. Goffman calls this corrective process 'interchange', the process of re-establishing ritual equilibrium. He associates 'face' with a sacred aspect of self, requiring the ritual associated with the expressive order to sustain it.²⁸

In addition Goffman refers to the patterns of verbal and non-verbal acts used to express an actor's view of a situation (or dialogue) and that of the other participants as a 'line'. An individual will consciously or subconsciously take a 'line' for a variety of reasons. Others too will assume he has wilfully taken a position and therefore in any given potential dialogue we will implicitly or explicitly need to consider at the outset the impression being created. Out of this Goffman defines 'face' as 'the positive social value a person effectively claims for him/herself by the *line* others assume he has taken during a particular contact [dialogue]'.

These aspects of interaction are appropriate considerations for dialogue, and challenge those who would seek to practise it to prepare with these presuppositions in mind.

²⁷ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 15-18.

²⁸ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 19-20.

Theory and Practice

Donald Carbaugh, who featured in the previous volume of *Dialogue Theories*, identifies the facets of the dialogic form, which can also be found implicitly in Goffman's work, including what Carbaugh describes as, its 'ethos of mutuality of exchange (or interdependence)'.²⁹ Goffman's approach has significantly affected the field of 'Intercultural communications' and seeded Carbaugh's work on 'cultural discourse analysis'. 'Carbaugh [also] extended Goffman's concept of *self* in his examination of social identity.'³⁰ Goffman's work has had a significant influence on the field of Communications Studies from which Carbaugh's work comes, not least in that authors like Carbaugh have adopted principles involving detailed observation of everyday interaction.

In a 2013 publication by Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz, *Erving Goffman: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communications Theory*, the authors set out the impact Goffman continues to have on Communications Studies, and note that much of his early work on interaction and observation is only now being explicitly claimed by the discipline, suggesting; 'without him [Goffman] observational studies of interaction would hardly exist today.'³¹ Goffman does not explicitly take cultural differentiation as the guiding principle for assessing or evaluating interaction and dialogue that might flow from it, as Carbaugh does, but rather offers a generic set of patterns, which he suggests are available for all to study.

The object of dialogue may fall into formal and informal domains but, if mutual understanding is the goal, it rests on the need for an authentic encounter out of which there may be the potential to build a relationship. Through many longer-term approaches to dialogue, particularly in international relations, conflict resolution, religiously motivated dialogue and community engagement, participants are often seeking trust built on such relationships, trust either of individuals or indeed of what they symbolically represent – their group or community.

To adopt a 'line' that justifies one's position in dialogue it would make sense to develop a relationship in any of the above settings by way of introduction and discovery of what is familiar for dialogue partners. This may be about mundane aspects of life, family, common association, background, geographic, demographic and cultural identity – all of which have authentic attributes – things we know we can confidently express. Even in conflict resolution the platform for mutual exchange is based on communicating the narrative, as we understand it. The rights and wrongs are not initially at issue, but an authentic version of events (as perceived) must be explained to find a starting point for resolution.

Goffman sees this mutual acceptance of facts as perceived by all parties as a basic structural feature of interaction, and from what is being suggested here, for dialogue too, especially with face-to-face talk. It is however more often than not, 'a working acceptance' and not a 'real one', since it tends to be based, not on heartfelt evaluations but more on a form of lip service to prevent derailing the interaction/dialogue. This has a conservative effect and can potentially lock people into a 'line' they may later want to move from, but find they have committed to it in such a way that to change positions may result in discrediting their stance. This is not an uncommon consideration for dialogue participants, which reinforces the preparatory necessity to enter into dialogue having considered your position clearly and to adopt consideration and respect for the other, as the need will arise for others to afford you similar consideration and respect.

²⁹ Cited in Frances Sleaf and Omer Sener, *Dialogue Theories*, ed. Paul Weller (London: The Dialogue Society, 2013), 73.

³⁰ Yves Winkin and Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, *Erving Goffman: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communications Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 89.

³¹ Winkin and Leeds-Hurwitz, *Erving Goffman: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communications Theory*, 5.

What then would a facilitator/practitioner of dialogue practically do, given Goffman's insights and his sensitising of us to the ritual forms of interaction? It would certainly be desirable that the structure of a dialogue meeting would bring each participant into 'reciprocal ratification'. As stated earlier in the chapter, the conventions and procedural rules would be put in place to guide and organise the flow of messages, so that it is understood what the topic is, and who will speak when. Introductions and general conversation legitimise each participant in the 'state of talk'. Declaring ourselves open to spoken communication guaranteeing the opportunity to maintain the flow of words, and symbolic gestures in the form of clearance cues³² are all used to indicate the point at which one speaker wishes to relinquish the floor and the other's desire to occupy it. The facilitator's role in identifying cues and supporting change of speakers also works in keeping speakers on topic and retaining polite accord, particularly where speakers are in sharp disagreement with one another. Here there is the need to bring about a temporary lip service to views that bring them into accord on matters of fact and principle. A particular ethos or emotional atmosphere should be allowed to prevail and when the accredited participants of talk fall into undue lulls as a sign of having nothing much in common or of being insufficiently self-motivated to find something to say, the facilitator can assist with keeping them on track. The facilitator is therefore enhancing or reinforcing the rituals which regulate the dialogue.

Finally, to draw the threads of this argument together I want to consider the mechanisms Goffman puts forward, and how a practitioner/facilitator of dialogue could implement the processes, rules and rituals.

Fundamental to the setting and outcomes for dialogue, in a formal and/or informal sense, practitioners/facilitators should associate potential success with a range of attributes as well as temporal and spatial considerations associated with 'Face Work'. When considering 'Face Work' practitioners should be aware of the importance of 'face-saving' as a fundamental human aspect of social interaction and dialogue. The problem with this however, is, in learning about the codes people adhere to as they interact with others; it is not always clear where they are going to, or why they want to get there. In fact, why one follows the code at all is not always clear, and yet we can assume within the code for interaction the following: emotional attachments associated with self-image and/or images of others, which are fundamental to dialogue. Other considerations should include: images attributed to power associated with status, considerateness based on a 'line' which supports compassion and sympathy towards others, and empathy for their plight and feelings which are either protective of face, or defensive of its potential loss.

If dialogue is to succeed in its goal, it requires confidence and authentic engagement on the part of participants born out of the rules of self-respect and of considerateness. For dialogue to seek mutuality, even if an agreement of positions is subject to different viewpoints, it is essential for participants to maintain both their own face and the face of the other participant(s). The 'line' taken when authenticated in the flow of events is therefore allowed to prevail and each participant is allowed to carry off the role he appears to have chosen for him/herself.³³ If not, embarrassment may ensue and discredited positions create a breakdown in communication.

Goffman's impact on dialogue theory can be seen in how he, as the forerunner for developing an observational approach, has created an opportunity for others to build on his analysis. He provides a language to describe and analyse social interaction as both face-to-face (physical

³² Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 35. Gestures or words mutually understood as part of paying attention to the speaker and indicating the moment at which spoken interaction moves between speakers. This space for change in the flow of words offered by a different speaker assumes a natural flow or rhythm, to allow change to take place.

³³ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual*, 11.

communication) and in co-presence (collective communication) that is, with more than one participant simultaneously, either planned or unplanned.

Questions for Reflection

1. Does Goffman's assessment of 'role taking' resonate in ways that you can explore?
 - a. Do you recognise examples of how, in interaction with individuals, you take the role of the 'other' and fill in the gaps in the dialogue even before you have heard them complete a full sentence?
 - b. What does that say about our capacity to listen?
 - c. Can you think of ways to concentrate on what you hear without the temptation to fill in the spaces in the dialogue?
2. Explore in your own interactions with others the feelings of embarrassment that may arise (no matter how fleeting). Is emotional awareness (awareness of feelings) something you would consider and practise with a view to greater authenticity in your practice of dialogue?
3. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman talks of 'front regions' and 'back regions'.
 - a. Can you think of examples of when your presentation to others and to self falls into these two categories?
 - b. How might the metaphor of 'performance' assist in our approach to understanding and practising dialogue?
4. Are you aware of the ways that you mobilise techniques in support of your own impression management?
 - a. What are these ways?
 - b. What might be the moral implications of them?

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