

WHAT IS WRONG WITH GOFFMAN?

Risto Heiskala, June 12th, 2025, at the University of Helsinki

Dear theorist as he is to me, Erving Goffman was not right about everything. In this talk today, I am going to bracket all of Goffman's great achievements and focus only on some rather significant things he got wrong (for achievements, see, for example, Manning 1988 and Collins 2004). There are at least six such points on which I think we should not follow Goffman uncritically.

First, Goffman always claimed that the micro-sociology of encounters was an independent field and had nothing to do with macro-sociology. He went so far as to say that even though the book *Frame Analysis* was about the cultural conceptualisation of social events, in the book "I make no claim whatsoever to be talking about the core matters of sociology - social organisation and social structure" (Goffman 1974: 13), and he repeated this claim in his last article based on the ASA Precedential Address "Interaction Order" (Goffman 1983) and elsewhere.

Some ardent followers of Goffman have tried to keep this strict demarcation between micro and macro alive, while others have interpreted it as a dated attempt to seek protection from the disciplinary imperialism of Parson's structural-functionalism, which was hegemonic in North American macro sociology for most of Goffman's career (Heiskala 1999).

There are also at least two attempts to retain Goffman's achievements in micro-sociology but to extend the analysis so as to establish a link with macro-analysis. One is Anthony Giddens' suggestion that 'co-presence' should not be defined as a social object in itself, as Goffman does in 'Interaction Order', for example, but rather as a mode of experience, meaning that situations of co-presence can be experienced as such by some, but not necessarily all, of the people in an encounter, and also that micro-encounters can be continuous with, and often enveloped by, macro-structures (Giddens 1988). I think that this is a fruitful avenue for someone to pursue in current research, as it is obvious that Sir Anthony now has other commitments to attend to.

Another attempt to extend Goffman's type of analyses to macro-structures is Randall Collins' book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (Collins 2004) and his related publications (starting from Collins 1988). Collins interprets Goffman's rituals from the perspective of Durkheim's sociology of religion (Durkheim 1912/2008 and Durkheim & Mauss 1903/1963) and claims that social order is based on ritualised encounters, so that these encounters are linked in long chains of interaction rituals. In the book (Collins 2004) he goes so far as to claim that the whole macro-structure of society not only depends on these chains of interaction rituals but can be reduced to them. Such a radical assertion has, of course, provoked some criticism,

claiming that the institutional structure of society, in the sense of organisations and social systems, has an existence of its own and often encompasses interaction rituals (Münch 2005, for example). Collins has later softened his position when commenting on Jonathan H. Turner's massive three-volume *Theoretical Principles of Sociology* (Turner 2010-2012). In the book, Turner divides sociology into macro-, meso- and micro-sociology. His analysis of macro follows the lead of functionalist theories and micro builds on Goffman, Garfinkel, Collins and other micro sociologists. This is taken up in the first two volumes, and the third volume then makes the claim that these two spheres of society can be linked by means of meso-sociology. Collins does not wholeheartedly agree with this analysis, but he does concede that when one reads the macro-sociology of figures such as Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Parsons, Luhmann and Habermas, one does indeed come across such phenomena that cannot be completely reduced to chains of interaction rituals (Collins 2021).

The way forward then seems to be to read the books of Collins and Turner together and see what can be made of them and similar analyses that follow their lead. Goffman himself would surely have seen this as a deception and a completely wrong way to go, but sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice one's idols in order to get results. I suppose that is what I am suggesting here.

So much for the first problem. **The second is Goffman's situationalism.** It allowed for a very powerful critique of lay consciousness and the psychological view of interaction when Goffman claimed that we should focus our attention on "not men and their moments, but moments and their men" as he does in *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman 1967). This slogan was meant to capture Goffman's view that even though each of us needs to have a life history in each of the situations we live, there is no necessary reason for that life story to remain unchanged across situations. In this sense, for Goffman, your life history is not a continuous identity in your soul, but rather a changing narrative that is evoked differently in each of the situations you happen to find yourself in; not a red thread then, but rather a kind of kaleidoscope, one might say.

This is a really powerful platform for criticising the bad faith that characterises everyday life and the therapeutic view of identity. In that sense it was a necessary step to take, but Goffman took his critique further. For him it was a worldview, and so he consistently denied any psychological continuity of actors' identities from one situation to another. This simply isn't true, and it also leads to a social theoretical approach that cannot explain the continuity of culture, society and people over time.

As a footnote, it also leads to misunderstandings such as Colin Campbell's mistakes in his critique of cultural sociology in *The Myth of Social Action*, where, after quoting Goffman, he made the mistaken generalisation that all cultural sociology is situationalist (Campbell 1996). After this misunderstanding, it was easy for Campbell to win this straw man in his book and declare all cultural sociology incompetent and useless.

The third problem in Goffman's work is the ambivalence of the concept of ritual. His use of the term can be seen as a continuum: at one end is an empty formula used for strategic interaction, as in the essay *Strategic Interaction* (1969), while at the other end is a full-fledged Durkheimian ritual (positive or negative) with sacredness created and felt, as in *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman 1967). Goffman's text flows along the continuum from one meaning to another without always specifying which meaning of the term ritual he has in mind. This renders many fragments and even entire papers ambivalent and difficult to interpret. The remedy for this problem would be more careful specification of the meaning intended in each use of the term ritual.

Fourth, in relation to strategic interaction, but often also elsewhere, there is a hidden rational choice perspective in Goffman's work. It is rarely explicit in Goffman himself, but it is there nonetheless because many fragments would be impossible to interpret without it. This perspective becomes more explicit in the work of some of his most important followers, two of whom I'll mention here. One is the book *Politeness* by Penelope Brown & Stephen C. Levinson (1987). The book itself is a minor classic, but unlike Goffman's work, it is based on an explicit rational choice approach, which assumes that people always try to get as much benefit as possible from their encounters.

A broader but still rational choice-based approach is *Interaction Ritual Chains* by Randall Collins (2004). There, the universe is ordered in such a way that people try to maximise emotional energy, which will be increased by successful rituals and reduced when rituals do not go well. Incidentally, in his *Theoretical Principles of Sociology*, Turner also adopts Collins' perspective in his micro-sociology (Turner 2010-2012).

But one might ask, what is wrong with the rational choice perspective and is there an alternative? Well, I'd like to think that economic calculation is important but not everything is economic. Collins is good at extending the perspective from a normal rational choice approach to a scene where emotional energy is central. But I feel that this too is a far too North American a perspective. As a normal Nordic melancholic, I would at least like our system of analysis to include the kind of things that Kierkegaard found most important. And do not tell me that Kierkegaardian melancholy is just another expression of the lack of emotional energy caused by unsuccessful interaction rituals. It is not, it is a state of mind – and our analytical system should make room for it. Some combination of psychoanalysis and phenomenological approach is what I recommend for that purpose. Either it, or some version of pragmatism, would also be needed to deal with habitual behaviour.

Fifth, I just mention in passing that specification of historical contexts in which interaction rituals take place in the way described by Goffman is lacking from Goffman, which makes several interaction patterns taking place in specific historical contexts of modern societies look universal. Here the text to be consulted is Randall Collins' *Conflict Sociology* and especially its Chapter 4 with its phase theory of history and its implications to interaction patterns. Collins originally published the book in late 1970s as a young man but it has recently

got a new life because Steven Sanderson edited a new updated and abridged version of it in 2009, which was a good thing because the book has stood the test of time astonishingly well. (Collins 2009.)

Finally, sixth, **there is the ambivalence of the concept of frame**, which is why Goffman is usually mentioned in the introductions to frame analytical papers, but people then tend to coin their own definition and uses of the concept. – Do not misunderstand me here. As always, Goffman has many important things to say, probably the most important being that meanings can change without frames changing when the hierarchical order of frames changes. He also makes some important distinctions, such as between the questions "What is going on?" and "What is the meaning of what is going on?" and between primary and secondary frames. However, I would recommend that people interested in frame analysis, in addition to Goffman's rather cluttered book *Frame Analysis* (Goffman 1974), also consult Gregory Bateson's work on frames in his *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Bateson 1972), which predates Goffman's book and contains a coherent, clear and multifaceted theory of framing. It thus has many advantages, but I am not claiming that it could completely replace Goffman's book, because in addition to the messy stuff, *Frame Analysis* includes many ideas that are not found in Bateson.

So, there you have it, my list of six problems in Goffman's work. In order to avoid misinterpretation, I repeat here at the end what I already said at the beginning: Goffman is a theorist dear to me, even if he is not as systematic as I thought in my youth. So, this is not a "kill your darlings" kind of talk, but rather a relatively extensive footnote to his achievements, which I have dealt with elsewhere in a rather admiring tone (Heiskala 1999 and 2003: 246-256).

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