

Is Goffman a
systematic social
theorist or a 'cynical
observer of white
American ...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Goffman has been widely regarded as a rudimentary, 'flat' thinker in the world of social theory. His work, whilst far reaching and insightful of the day to day events in social life, has come under much controversy resulting in phrases typical of the example above. To answer such a question, we need first to ask ourselves what was Goffman's preoccupation. Was his aim to develop a systematic sociological framework in which to discern more about modern life on a micro level, or to use the discipline as a guise in which to be damning about a certain social group in American society?

My first instinct is to assume that his intentions involved both factors, but that there is an emphasis more so on one of these objectives. If my interpretation of his works attest to this, I think the next imperative question would be does this make Goffman's work a useless read? I think this is the main tension of the question. Do we renounce Goffman in light of his biased take on the white American middle-class because we believe this prejudice has compromised his efforts as a sociologist? There are

In *The Presentation of the self in Everyday Life* Goffman seeks to outline and illustrate what it is about the minor happenings in the day to day life that makes it a vitally important area of study in sociology. He uses the theatrical metaphors to describe techniques used by the individual to present a certain self to a particular audience. His methods of illustration involve drawing on (many tenuous) examples of everyday life from literary novels or depicting situations where a waiter may face difficulty in his job etc.

Goffman fully acknowledges the triviality of the observations but highlights how consistent these observations tend to be in the make-up of everyday life

and hopes that his approach, in 'providing a clear cut dimension for formal sociological analysis' will establish a new perspective in sociology. He calls this the dramaturgical perspective. Goffman starts with the premise that an individual gives two impressions of himself when presented to others, 'the expression that he gives and the expression he gives off'ⁱⁱ.

The first impression is a deliberate one, involving purposeful communication of language and body gestures whilst the second entails a variety of actions which are more indicative than deliberate on part of the actor's behaviour. But this distinction is only of value in the first instance as we shall see, individuals convey misinformation in both types of communication, 'the first involving deceit, the second feigning'ⁱⁱⁱ.

But whatever the intention of the actor it is in his best interests to control others' conduct and this is assured by what Goffman terms 'influencing the definition of the situation' and what he means by this is: giving others an impression of oneself which leads them to voluntary action that the impression desired. He gives the example of the 'popular girl' in a female dormitory. One way of ensuring her popularity is to arrange it so that she receives a number of calls on a regular basis in her dormitory.

This will guarantee the desired effect of other girls believing her to be a person in demand and would therefore treat her in a way she found enviable. Goffman also notes the fact that observers of the actor are not merely motionless in such situations but in their turn help to define the situation by their reaction (or lack of) and 'by virtue of any lines of Action they initiate to him (the actor)'^{iv}. I. e. the popularity of the girl depends on the reaction of

others to her phone calls. They could be completely ignored or girls might become aware of the intentions of these phone calls and react in a not so desirable fashion.

Goffman defines a number of terms that he uses throughout his report on *Everyday Life*. Interaction is between two or more individuals on a face to face basis. Performance is an act which can only take place in the presence of others. It is an act which aims to form a desired impression and thus the desired effect on others. All these metaphors take place in a social establishment which is 'any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place'v. And it is within this arena that a divide lies.

There is the back region where the performance is practiced and the front region where the performance is staged and the issue of access to these regions. It is those in the team who are allowed access to all areas and those deemed inappropriate for the performance are kept out. These terms incorporated into a systematic theory encompass his new analytical approach to sociology; the dramaturgical approach, which Goffman believes - alongside the technical, political, structural and cultural perspectives - 'can be employed as the end-point of analysis, as a final way of ordering facts'vi.

This approach in its efforts would help in discerning the different techniques of impression management employed within any given establishment and seek to provide detailed knowledge of those identities that operate with the establishment. He argues also that the dramaturgical approach is of benefit

to the existing perspectives in sociology; the political he cites as the most obvious one in which both intersect quite nicely. He reasons that for power of any kind to be attained effectively it must be 'clothed' in order to be displayed effectively and the different ways in which that power dramatisation can form varied impressions.

Thus power in its naked form is in actual fact disguised to function as a means of persuasion to your audience 'it is a means of communication, not merely a means of action'^{vii}. He ends his report on a 'moral note' at first declaring a 'fundamental dialect' in all social relations. When an individual is in the presence of others, he wants to discern all he can about the present situation and how to shape the definition of it.

This would mean having prior social knowledge of all other actors involved their feelings towards him and the outcome of this interaction after he has left the social setting. As an individual is rarely privy to all such information he relies on 'cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc'^{viii} to develop the necessary knowledge. It's in this way that an individual tries to form a reality of the situation by relying on appearances. Goffman acknowledges the ethnocentric element in his dramaturgical framework and fully admits to it being one stressed upon the Anglo-American society.

But he also attempts to persuade the reader that there are notes of the dramaturgical sense in non-Western countries such as the Chinese where 'saving face' is a fundamental requirement in everyday social life. Here and other places throughout the world we have instances of a personal front in social life and pertaining to social rules which may not appear so alien to the

dramaturgical perspective. I would however assert that whilst there is some validity in this statement, the dramaturgical framework should be viewed in mind of a Western society.

But I think we have established that Goffman does set out a somewhat loose but definite systematic social framework in which one could expound upon social interaction. Anthony Giddens in *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* notes Goffman as an 'intrinsically accessible' sociologist as a cause for his popularity in the public sphere but goes on to suggest that it is the very plain language which he uses that results in his lack of legitimacy in the sociological discipline - 'his texts do not abound with the strange sounding neologisms'ix.

He also cites the fact that Goffman supports these theories neither with any statistical evidence, nor detailed observations in the real life but with fictional literature and base assertions. He describes these methods as 'cavalier' in execution as there empirical data appears extremely lacking. Goffman's attempts to establish a methodology seems more like a stream of essays rather than an integrated body of work (which might explain his need to reference literature as support for his theories rather than the empirical approach favoured by those of his discipline.

Giddens also admits to the assertion that Goffman's work seemed like 'no more than light relief'x compared to the functionalist and naturalistic models of his time. Indeed, it was a conscious effort on his part to steer away from those of the discipline who sought to ascertain a grandiose system of social life. It can be said that Goffman pioneered the 'trivial' in sociology, bringing

it to the forefront of the discipline, believing it to be as important as the macro level of appreciation in the sociological field.

He often employs the term 'micro-sociological' in defining his works and Giddens is quick to remark Goffman's many weak points. But in all this criticism, Giddens endeavours to defend Goffman as more than an 'idiosyncratic' observer of trivial life who lets his mind wander wherever it pleases and tries to establish some consistency in his work. The second part of the question on whether Goffman is a 'cynical observer of white American middle-class mores' comes from the chapter by Giddens in *Social theory and Modern Sociology*.

Firstly, it is important to note that Giddens acknowledges that Goffman's observations stem from a 'restricted milieu' - that milieu being an environment conducive to 'self-seeking activities of individual living in a competitive, individualistic cultural'xi. But this is because his understanding of everyday life has revolved primarily around the 'middle-class conduct in a few regions of America'xii and so it is for this reason that when reading Goffman we must keep in mind this open admission, and judge him with this limitation as a given.

But we should also be cautious of the belief (Giddens' and Goffman's) that these generalisations are potentially applicable outside of this consideration. As I said earlier I do not believe that these comments bare-out in all reality or are desirable ones in so much as recognising the fact that there are varying degrees of difference throughout societies of the world. Trying to

find or prove that one framework is applicable to all social life is quite lazy and quite untrue.

So to clarify, I believe that Goffman's generalisation of middle class behaviour in America should be under evaluation more so than the fact that his assumptions are geographically and culturally limited to middle class behaviour. This does not (in my view) take him out of the sociological field but makes him a more specific form of sociologist who may prove beneficial in the light of societies which function in the same manner as the American middle-class does.

If you read extracts of Goffman completely out of context he would appear quite a crude sociologist who saw all individuals as constant performers out for self-seeking ends. ' Perhaps the real crime of the confidence man is not that he takes money from his victims but that he robs all of us of the belief that middle-class manners and appearance can be sustained only by middle-class people'xiii. Here he is making a direct judgement on middle-class, comparing this grouping to a thief who possesses much confidence.

But perhaps we should look in more detail at what Goffman means when he uses the term cynic: ' When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ' sincere' for individuals who may believe in the impression fostered by their own performance. ' xiv So we see here in introduction of the term cynical as having an actual place and working term in Goffman's work. The question now is whether he identifies a whole section

in American society as embodying this characteristic. And if so, is this a justified claim?

Giddens doesn't believe so. He sees Goffman's take on social life as embodying 'trust and tact are more fundamental' in social interaction than cynicism. He ends this argument on the note that if day to day social life is a game, collaboration is essential, and cynicism need not be the inevitable. Goffman's work describes a 'highly moralised world of social relationships' but it is through tact and alliance that we remedy the moral fabric of our societies. Indeed, Goffman does end *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* on a moral note in which we can deduce something of an ethical touch in his work.

It is clear he does not want to appear an objective sociologist who believes some things are inevitable in the fashion Marx or Weber did. Goffman has an opinion about social life and the types of interaction and seeks to affect it. He believes there to be something lacking in the American middle-class and that is trust and genuine interaction. So, I would agree with both parts of the question. Goffman is a cynic when it comes to the American middle-class but in turn I would enquire: what's wrong with this? There might be some truth in it.

He does have a rather weak and some would argue 'flat' sociological system which doesn't build or seem very long term but it is also quite evident in much of his work that Goffman treats the American middle-class with contempt. I would argue that all academics bring their own frustrations and personal preoccupations to their work, it just appears that Goffman is

criticising a group from which most of the academic world come. It is true that Goffman doesn't help himself and some may say have aided critics in labelling him. He does - as previously stated - lack that technical rigour in sociological terminology.

However poorly conceived and received, Goffman's work had an attractive element to it which pierced the American conscience in the time in which he wrote. It might have been the apparent cynical tone with which he wrote (and with which the public received it) it may also have been the accessibility of his work or the mere controversial nature of the book. But many, including Giddens have noted Goffman's systematic theorising, be it of a loose and wondering nature. It is still there.