

## GOFFMAN: CONTENT AND METHOD FOR SEMINAL THOUGHT

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### GOFFMAN CONCEPTUALIZATION

Erving Goffman, widely acknowledged as a leading contemporary social thinker, is a prolific and popular writer, having authored 35 major journal articles and many books. His influence spread through innovative concepts like *dramaturgic model*, and the *game metaphor* for analysis of social interaction, and his analysis of societal response in *stigma*. "Since the publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman has been widely regarded as one who could develop effective and intriguing theory. His perspective and concepts have become part of the standard vocabulary of sociology." (Glaser, Strauss 1967 136). Regarding *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, another of Goffman's admirers suggests that it represents the apex of the author's craftsmanship, brought about by a rare blend of scientist and humanist (Cuzzort 1969 6).

Looking at the relation between these two books may offer insight into the Goffman method of creating and validating theory. Methods of data collection, investigation of phenomena and style of presentation are similar, but *The Presentation of Self* clearly embodies the major theoretical development, while *Stigma* consists of a concentrated application and a sort of testing of the theory and concepts developed. In both books, Goffman's effort is directed to developing theoretical frameworks beyond the study of the substantive areas. In the Preface to *The Presentation of Self*, he begins: "I mean this report to serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied ..." In *Stigma* he notes that numerous good studies of stigmas have accumulated; he wishes to show "how this material can be economically described within a single conceptual scheme." He continues, "This task will allow me to formulate and use a special set of concepts ..."

*Stigma* involves not only an application of a previously constructed framework, but also a continued theoretical development. Thus, the book provides opportunity to examine both the content-data of seminal thought and the

concomitant methodology. Certainly, *Stigma* is a compelling and exciting book, filled with what C W Mills meant by "sociological imagination." It is filled with convincing glimpses of social reality, with a combination of keen, profound insights and a persuasive style. It is perhaps worthwhile to investigate what Goffman is *doing*, and the method and sources of data which lie behind his analyses. If theory can be defined as: *A map of an empirical referent*, it seems fair to assume that the ultimate validity and generality of theoretical contributions are determined by the data and method from which the theory was generated.

Textbooks on social research methodology condition the student to expect certain prescribed procedures in every report of sociological investigation. One expects the scientific method to be apparent in the process of formulating most research problems and research designs. Whatever the process entails, the interaction between theory and empirical reality should be reciprocal and ongoing. Movement from one to the other should involve use of unbiased data collection, stated hypotheses and variables specified in a form testable in a reliable manner, with careful consideration of causal relations and inferences.

These requirements constitute an ideal. But its acknowledgment is not to deny that notable contributions have been made to the fund of sociological knowledge through efforts which either fall short of the formal prescription, or even employ different criteria for what is acceptable and fruitful in sociological endeavor. The effect is to place the student in a vortex of controversy over different methodological approaches and the adequacy of differing theories generated from them.

One argument centers on the relative merits of quantitative versus qualitative empirical evidence. These two positions are often treated as polar opposites. They are referred to as *scientism*, *mathematical-statistical hard sociology*, and *methodolatry* by one critical faction, and as *humanism*, *verstehen*, and *soft sociology* by the opposing faction. Kingsley Davis supports the first position and criticizes

those who fail to found their theory on quantitative data: "Others share in a regrettable social science propensity: theory, instead of meaning the widest body of rigorous reasoning about a set of observed relationships, has come to mean a long stretch of purely verbal analysis." (Davis 1959 313)

Bierstedt (1960 9) champions the humanist orientation, suggesting that all sociology need not be scientific: "Veblen used no questionnaires, Sumner no coefficients of correlation, and Tocquevill was wholly untrained in the modern techniques of field investigation. One does not imply from these examples that either ignorance or neglect of formal method is a virtue. One does imply that something more than method is required to achieve a genuine superiority. The reason these writers were great sociologists is that they were humanist first."

Another argument centers not so much on the kind of data from which to generate or test theory, but the extent to which it relates to an actual empirical referent. Larson's (1973) differentiation between *grounded theory* and *ungrounded theory* illustrates the dilemma. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967 2), grounded theory means "the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research." Ideally, grounded theory is solidly anchored in the empirical world. At the other extreme, ungrounded theory consists of abstract impressionism, rational construction without form or content. In this realm of theoretical development and testing, there is a tendency to present analysis without adequately explaining how certain conclusions were selected in preference to other logical and plausible conclusions. Not surprisingly, "... the personal style of the "ungrounded theorist" rather than the content of his work becomes the focal point not only of his detractors, but also his admirers." (Larson 1973 3) The whole effect is to remove from consideration the objectivity essential to scientific method.'

### GOFFMAN METHOD

The reader of *Stigma* soon becomes aware that Goffman is not concerned with formal method, and that his theoretical development and validation often veer toward the ungrounded pole. He does not rely on

elaborate measurements, or structured questionnaires or interviews. He does not hesitate to use literary examples if they help to illustrate a concept or idea. He relies heavily on case studies, gleanings of "expert opinion" from other sociological and psychological studies, as well as novels and casual conversations. His work is mainly of a descriptive, qualitative nature which seems to blend well with his own profound insights. According to Cuzzort (1969 192), Goffman qualifies as a scientist: "Goffman stands back and observes through perspectives of science, the artful behavior of man. The effect is powerful ... the large following ... in sociological and psychological circles is a result of the fact that he brings together the synthetic powers of the humanistic artist with the analytic and objective powers of the contemporary social scientist."

Since Goffman's seminal writings are devoid of conventional measures, the effort to determine his methodology must center on the content of the writings per se. Content analysis is the highly flexible tool which can be molded to any conceptual format deemed promising for assessing non-obvious characteristics about a corpus of scientific work. Goffman used copious short footnotes to illuminate his text for the reader concerned with possible sources for his ideas and demonstrative examples. A simple content analysis of those footnotes for *Stigma* provides an exploratory avenue to the Goffman method. Content analysis is quantitative in the sense that it involves measurement and classification of some component of documentary materials, providing a quantitative method of working with qualitative data (Simon 1969 271). Although content analysis of the footnotes is elementary, some intriguing facts emerge concerning Goffman's data sources which constitute much of his scientific methodology, and from that, his formulation of theory.

There is a total of 292 footnotes in *Stigma*, each citing a source which illuminates or demonstrates the various points made in the text. Of the 292 footnotes, 280 are included in the present analysis. Sufficient information was not available for the remaining 12 references to be traced. The frequency distribution by number of citations per source for 194 citations is indicated in Table 1.1, with 74 single citations listed alphabetically by

**TABLE 1: SOURCE CITATION FREQUENCY IN *STIGMA* FOOTNOTES**

**Table 1.1 Multiple Citations**

Citations	Authors	Source Year and Title	Citations	Authors	Source Year and Title
15	Chevigny 1962	<i>My Eyes Have a Cold Nose</i>	4	Keitlin T 1962	<i>Farewell to Fear</i>
15	Henrich, Kriegel 1961	<i>Experiments in Survival</i>	3	Atholl J 1956	<i>Reluctant Hangman.</i>
12	McGregor 1953	<i>Facial Deformities-Plastic Surgery</i>	3	Riesman D 1951	Some observations on marginality. Phylon
7	Goffman 1959, 1963	<i>Encounters; Asylums; Self</i>	3	Russell 1949	<i>Victory in My Hands</i>
7	Rolph 1955 1957	<i>Women of the Streets; Personal Identity</i>	3	Sartre J 1960	<i>Anti-Semite and Jew.</i>
7	Stearn 1961 1962	<i>Sisters of the Night; Sixth Man</i>	3	Viscardi 1952, 1961	<i>A Man's Stature. Laughter in the Lonely Night.</i>
6	Carling 1962	<i>And Yet We Are Human</i>	3	Wildwood 1959	<i>Against the Few.</i>
6	Lemert 1948 1951	<i>Social Pathology</i>	2	Becker 1963, 1955	<i>Outsiders. Marijuana use and social control. Social Probl</i>
6	Toynbee 1961	<i>Underdogs</i>	2	Broyard 1950	Portrait of the inauthentic negro. <i>Commentary X</i>
6	Yarrow, Clawson 1955	Social meaning of mental illness. <i>J Social Issues</i>	2	Gowan A G 1956	<i>The War Blind.</i>
6	Hathaway 1943	<i>The Little Locksmith.</i>	2	Greenwald 1958	<i>The Call Girl.</i>
6	Orbach et al 1957	Fear and defensive adaptations to loss of anal sphincter control. <i>Psychoanal Rev</i>	2	Griffin J H 1960	<i>Black Like Me.</i>
5	Baker W, L Smith 1939	Facial disfigurement & personality. <i>J Amer Med Assn</i>	2	Freeman, Kasenbaum 1956	The illiterate in America. <i>Social Forces</i>
5	Criddle 1953	<i>Love is not Blind</i>	2	Hartman 1951	Criminal aliases: A psychological study. <i>J Psych</i>
5	Davis F 1961	Deviance disavowal: Management of strained interaction by visibly handicapped. <i>Social Probl</i>	2	Hooker E 1961	Homosexual community. Unpubl
5	Lewin K 1948	<i>Resolving Social Conflicts Pt 3</i>	2	Hughes H M 1961	<i>The Fantastic Lodge.</i>
5	Livingstone 1963	<i>Living with Epileptic Seizures</i>	2	Landy, Singer 1961	Social organization & culture of former mental patients. <i>Human Relats</i>
5	Parker, Allerton 1962	<i>Courage of his Convictions</i>	2	Linduska 1947 1961	<i>My Polio Past. Madelaine: An Autobiography.</i>
5	White R K et al 1948	<i>Studies in Adjustment to Visible Injuries</i>	2	Mills E 1961	<i>Living with Mental Illness.</i>
4	Barker R 1953	Social psychology of physical disability. <i>J Social Issues</i>	2	Rigman 1959	<i>Second Sight.</i>
4	Johnson J 1960	<i>Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man</i>	2	Seeman 1958	The intellectual & the language of minorities. <i>Amer J Sociol</i>
			2	Wolfe B 1950	Ecstatic in black face. <i>Modern Rev</i>

**Table 1.2 Single references by author.**

Adams R 1961	Ernst, Schwartz 1962	Lindesmith, Strauss 1956	San Francisco Chron 1963
Allport G 1958	Fleming 1954	Love E 1957	Savitz, Tomasson 1959
Baldwin J	Glass R 1962	Maurer 1949	Schachtel 1961
Bainbridge 1961	Gordon 1960	Meltzer 1962	Shaler 1904
Bartlett 1961	Greenberg 1950	Messinger 1962	Somer, Osmand, Pancyr '60
Belknap 1956	Heckstall-Smith 1954	Myerson, Maller 1960	Stone 1962
Berkeley Daily Gaz 1961	Henry 1954	Murphey Unpubl	Swartz 1957
Broom, Beam, Harris 1955	Hirshi 1962	Norman 1958	Thomas
Brossard 1955	Hodgson 1954	Parkins 1961	Unadjusted Girl 1923
Birdwhistell 1955	Hughes E 1958	Palmer 1958	Unpubl ms 1952
Burma 1946	Kane 1927	Perry et al eds 1956	Warner W L 1937
Clark E 1961	Kardmer 1951	Perry S E 1954	Wechsler 1960
Chaudhuri 1959	Kerkhoff 1952	Pear 1957	West N 1962
Coser 1962	Kogon, McLeod 1947	Phelan 1953	Westwood 1960
Dendrickson, Thomas 1954	Kohn, Williams 1956	Poli 1960	White D R 1961
Dentler, Erikson 1959	Ladieu et al 1947	Poll 1962	Marx Gary Unpubl ms
Dexter L A 1958	Lee R 1953	Reiss 1961	Sawadski, Lazarsfeld 1935
Dickens' Amer Notes 1842	Levin 1953	Roneche 1953	
Erikson E 1950	Lieber 1962	Rubin 1961	

author in Table 1.2, with year of publication. Listing titles for multiple citations shows the range and types of sources for Goffman's analytical thought processes. He freely acknowledged these intellectual obligations, (Figure 1) showing his personal contacts and generalizations from experience. He used an antenna to pick up stray fragments of data, examples, and concepts, and wove them into

the sturdy web of his arguments. The wide range of sources incorporated in *Stigma* is definitely worth noting.

- 1) Case studies and fictional sources such as reflective novels are favorite sources to supply examples and illustrations of his point.
- 2) It is significant that social scientists have ignored the *pimp* category in prostitution research. Goffman calls this a hiatus in the

objective study of this subject. Much of the basic problem in social science research is made up of operant latent factors which the social scientist has yet to discover.

## FIGURE 1: OTHER *STIGMA* NOTES

### 1.1 Personal Credits.

"I know a physician ... p 42

Harvey Sacks, p 55

Harold Garfinkel, p 62

Evelyn Hooker, p 83

Harold Garfinkel, p 88

David Matza, p 139

Dorothy Smith, p 143

### 1.2 Insightful Comments

"The management of stigma is, of course, a central theme in the English novel." p 5.

"... a convention seems to have emerged in popular life-story writing where a questionable person proves his claim to normalcy by citing his acquisition of a spouse and children ..." p 7.

"Although there is ample fictional, and even some case history material on prostitutes, there is very little material of any kind on the pimp." p 79.

## DISCUSSION

Exactly half of all 292 references cited in *Stigma* refer to 22 of the 127 authors and confidants listed as idea and illustration sources. Of the 269 cited works, 191, or 71 percent were contemporary, within the previous 9-year period, and 78, or 29 percent were from earlier publication. Since Goffman relies so little on quantitative data, there is no barrier to current validity. And we can probably discount the heavy concentration of references on just one-sixth of the listed sources, since there is no clear requirement to distribute references equally among sources. However the analyst might probe further into the effects of source dominance in *Stigma*. Is there evidence that Goffman's analysis is misdirected by favoritism is source selection?

More in-depth analysis yields further implications. This analysis consists of classifying into a series of categories all those sources not considered to be of the quantitative, formal

method type. Categories were constructed from information gained by tracking down and checking the content of all listed sources. The task was complicated because 40 of the references were published in Great Britain, and many were not available to us. Cases where the source could not be obtained were classified where possible according to information gleaned from literary abstracts and from Goffman's context. This classification was facilitated by Goffman's habit of indicating whether the source was a novel or a biography. Finally, sources were classified in four categories, in addition to that containing the more scientific studies. The categories appeared to be clearly defined and mutually exclusive. If a source qualified for any one of the categories, that was the only category in which it could be placed.

The four analytical categories are presented with a definition, an illustrative example, and the percentage which the category represents for all *Stigma* source citations.

1) **Fictional or hypothetical.** Not based on fact but on fantasy or conjecture. Example: I Levin's *A Kiss Before Dying*. 14 percent.

2) **Bio- or autobiographical, or a single case.** Example: Griffin's *Black Like Me*. 22 percent.

3) **Essay, descriptive, & qualitative.** These sources are similar in construction and content-type to Goffman's *Stigma*. 19 percent.

4) **Intuitive suggestion.** Based on intuition or suggestions from friends in conversation. Example: "Suggested by Evelyn Hooker in Conversation." 3.4 percent.

This category system accounts for a total of 58 percent of Goffman's citations. It provides an excellent example of extraordinarily fruitful qualitative output. This 58 percent of Goffman's research sources which lies outside the hard, quantitative data so popular with neopositivists in sociology today represents the key to Goffman's methodology. At the same time, we must recognize that 42 percent of the data sources used in *Stigma* are from studies by sociologists and psychologists that would be perfectly acceptable to more quantitative and formal methodological orientations. When these two groups of sources are brought together with Goffman's own inventive insights, we get a readable and provocative book like *Stigma*.

## CONCLUSION

It is apparent that Goffman's methodology is an adroit synthesis of differently derived data. While the debate continued throughout the discipline between proponents of the qualitative versus the quantitative emphasis in research methodology, and between ungrounded versus grounded theory and theory development, Goffman boldly generated and applied theory on the basis of a subtle wedding of the polar types. He reflected an easy, unquestioning trust in his sources, which he quoted wholesale. Two alternative conclusions are possible.

- 1) Goffman has mixed clay and iron. Thus the theoretical contributions, because of their mixed data and unorthodox methodology, are of weak and tenuous validity.
- 2) Goffman has combined two metals in a new and priceless alloy. The blend of content and methodology draws strength from both of

these constituent elements and offers a useful alternative to the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy in sociological analysis.

## REFERENCES

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