"SITUATION" VERSUS "FRAME": THE "INTERACTIONIST" AND THE "STRUCTURALIST" ANALYSES OF EVERYDAY LIFE *

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"Situation" and "frame," the elementary units of analysis of two versions of micro-sociology, are compared in order to elucidate the currently existing, but (as such) barely recognized, interactionist and structuralist approaches that they represent and to demonstrate that they contain widely divergent understandings of everyday life. After certain of the notions that underlie each of them are made clear, the contrasting positions of these two approaches are reviewed with respect to common issues, including the nature of the self, the place of meanings and subjectivity in analysis, and what are appropriate research methods. These considerations provide the basis for a general interpretation of Goffman's work, something the sociological literature has lacked. Though Goffman is most often treated as a symbolic interactionist, this paper argues that a better understanding of his work results from reading it as a version of contemporary structuralism. The fundamental ways in which his structuralism is distinct from the cultural (as well as the interactionist) approach also are given.

Micro-sociology, the attempt at a disciplined study of everyday life, has required that its theorists conceive of the "natural" unit of analysis for such a study, that is, the organized and bounded social entity most immediate to the individual's experience, within which his/her mundane affairs with others occur. This paper examines and compares two of the most significant of these conceptions—the "situation," as it is applied within symbolic interactionism, and the "frame," as conceived (most notably) by Erving Goffman—in order to demonstrate that they contain widely divergent understandings of the nature of everyday life. It is an exercise that must be seen as a fragment of what is necessarily a lengthier, more complex project that attempts to develop a truer and more comprehensive understanding of the body of Goffman's work, in part by proposing to view it as an American variant of contemporary structuralism and, consequently, by abandon-

ing the common misunderstanding that makes of Goffman a symbolic interactionist.

The initiate into American sociology might well come to know Goffman as a symbolic interactionist. That Goffman occupies a place within this school, sometimes as a major spokesperson, has been a frequent casual assertion in informal sociological talk and the (presumably) firmer conviction of many of those who make the classification of sociologists and sociological works their instrumental concern (e.g., Dreitzel, 1970:viii; Zeitlin, 1973:189ff; Mullins, 1973:76ff; Warshay, 1975:29ff; Eisenstadt and Curelaru, 1976:85,199,277; Cuzzort and King, 1976:240fn).[1] This paper asserts that when Goffman's work is forced into the symbolic interactionist paradigm and made to reflect, and speak to, its special concerns, much of the author's actual meaning and significance is lost, the result being some measure of distortion.[2] Such misreading

[1] Many others make the assertion though it is not essential to their task (e.g. Denzin, 1972; Cole, 1975; Stokes and Hewitt, 1976)

[2] There are good sociological reasons to be found for this forced reading of Goffman's work within the organization and recent history of American sociology which, for lack of space, cannot be broached

conceals the fundamental and systematic differences between the theoretical character of Goffman's work and that of symbolic interactionism properly understood. These theoretical differences—regarding, for instance, the origin and nature of the self, the place of meanings and actors' subjective orientations in analysis, and what are appropriate research methods—surround issues of central importance, that is, those issues with respect to which symbolic interaction as a perspective has been defined by its leading figures (see Rose, 1962; Blumer, 1969). As will be seen, Goffman's approach stands opposed to the central tenets and most basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism.

Goffman's work from the beginning, has demonstrated not random departures from symbolic interactionism or mere idiosyncracies, but the application of an alternative paradigm.[3] As opposed to the interactionist framework, Goffman proposes, albeit somewhat implicitly, his own version of a structuralist one.[4] A structuralist reading of Goffman's work frees up for correct theoretical understanding most of the elements that have been seen in terms of author's style (or taken as superfluous) as well as those that previously have been misinterpreted or have simply gone unnoticed.

In this paper, the constructs of situation and frame represent two opposing paradigms that are engaged currently in the study of everyday life, but each must be seen as the derivative of a classical sociological tradition. "Situation" is a password that opens up an interactionist (or social action) approach, the basic principles of which are Weberian, while "frame" poses an apparatus for a kind of structuralism for which Goffman is heavily indebted to Durkheim.[5] The use within micro-sociology of these fundamental constructs activates many of the elements operative in each of these broader classical traditions, and multiple points of comparison continually suggest themselves. In this paper, most of these must be left undeveloped.

It should be clear that the identification and comparison of distinct theoretical approaches, such as the two in question here, is a project that requires some systematic method of its own. This study follows the suggestion of Bierstedt (1960:8) "to push [each] particular interpretation of social phenomena just as far as it is reasonable to go in our effort to shed illumination on it." What are presented, then, are idealized descriptions of each approach, which "candidly employ exaggeration" of their purity and exclusivity of orientation as an "heuristic device" (Bierstedt, 1960:8). This is seen as only a preliminary step in the overall effort to unify sociological knowledge, but crucial in order to avoid the common "facile synthesis" in which a reconciliation of perspectives is achieved at the cost of letting important differences between them go unrecognized. The point of our slightly

here. There are, it must be said, those commentators who refrain from applying the interactionist framework, at least in full, in their analyses of Goffman, and these are the better pieces (e.g., Gouldner, 1970:378–90; Glaser and Strauss, 1972; Manning, 1976). Yet these, too, fail to reach a general understanding of Goffman because they apply no alternative framework for interpretation and, therefore, remain impressionistic. Most often, some oddities are noticed about Goffman's work but they remain puzzles (e.g., McCall and Simmons, 1966:144–5). The resulting discussion of Goffman's work can be a confusing one (e.g., Collins and Makowsky, 1972:202–14).

[3] It is not my intention to deny that important changes have taken place in Goffman's approach that some (e.g., Manning, 1976) have noted. This paper focuses on the central issues with regard to which Goffman has always been at odds with symbolic interaction. It might be said, however, that it is in *Frame Analysis* (1974) that Goffman most consistently takes the position ascribed to him here.

[4] Certain commentators have begun to see this, notably Jack Douglas (personal communication) and Jameson (1976) whose excellent article suffers only from too great an association of Goffman with ethnomethodology.

[5] Unfortunately, in this paper, the links with these traditions cannot be made fully clear. This is an important task because micro-sociology has been thought of as a homogeneous field based on its presumed empirical domain, everyday life, and rejected or defended as a whole on the basis of the importance or triviality attributed to this interest. This atheoretical tendency should be counteracted by locating different micro-sociological theories within the greater theoretical paradigms to which they belong, that is, by showing to what theories of *society* they contribute. On this issue, this paper utilizes the recent work of Pope et al. (1975), which emphasizes the divergences, theoretically and methodologically, between Durkheim and Weber.

idealized codification of approaches, then, is to establish the actual nature of what are taken to be valid perspectives on the topic at hand. Only after such an effort is made can we hope for the working out of differences to produce a true synthesis, one that does not sacrifice the indispensable contribution intrinsic to either of the original partial approaches.

The Uniqueness of "Situations"

Symbolic interactionists have considered it their theoretical calling to describe the rich texture of everyday social life, a quality highly valued by them and, allegedly, coldly ignored in the functionalist portrayal of social reality, against which they define their movement (e.g., Scott, 1970). To remain true to human experience, they have insisted on study at close range, as participants, and, from this vantage point, the situations that make up everyday life have been seen as idiosyncratic.

> Objective situations are unique. In the words of W. I. Thomas, "social situations never spontaneously repeat themselves, every situation is more or less new, for every one includes new human activities differently combined." (Stebbins, 1967:154)

The reward for research activity would seem to be an endless wonderment.

In fact, given this initial assumption about the uniqueness of situations, the abundant research energies of symbolic interactionism have cast it, as a body of work, in the direction of ever-more detailed description, that is, toward a vigorous empiricism. What concepts it has managed to generate have always been in danger of being rejected from within the paradigm by practitioners whose tactic to employ more precision (to appreciate more fully the rich texture, the "indeterminacy," of social life) undercuts attempts at generalization (e.g., Turner, 1962). The assertion that each situation is unique has been devastating of theory. Symptomatically, Blumer (1969:147) proposed that what he called the "definitive concept," that refers "precisely to what is common to a class of objects," give way in sociology to the less powerful "sensitizing concept" to prevent unwarranted

generalization. As he explained, "working with and through the distinctive or unique nature of the empirical instance, instead of casting this unique nature aside calls, seemingly by necessity, for a sensitizing concept" (Blumer, 1969:149).[6]

In contrast with the above-noted tendencies within interactionism, Goffman's work should be seen, in its essence and direction, as a formal sociology.[7] This means that it is an effort toward the abstraction from everyday life of the very definite and limited number of forms or modes in which this life occurs. Goffman's goal, following a typical structuralist program-statement, is "the enumeration of forms and their organization, the exposition of signifying structures and their mode of functioning" (Lane, 1970:37); that is, the discovery of classes of objects, precisely the project Blumer rejects.[8] There are not so many forms in which everyday life occurs that one will frequently be unrecognizable, its rules unfamiliar, to individuals who find themselves contained in it. Each of the forms of everyday activity studied by Goffman has a name: one is at the "movies," or the "dinner table." Note, however, that situations are nameless, but describable as, for instance, "the time Joe spilled his beans."

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[6] Compare Weber:

> For the knowledge of historical phenomena in their concreteness, the most general laws because they are the most devoid of content, are the least valuable. The more comprehensive the validity or scope of a term, the more it leads away from the richness of reality for in order to include the common elements of the largest number of phenomena, it must necessarily be as abstract as possible and hence devoid of content. In the cultural sciences, the knowledge of the universal or general is never valuable in itself (Weber, 1949:30)

[7] Denzin (1972:88ff.) cites Goffman as offering a "formal sociology," yet his description of what constitutes formalism is, at least in the case of Goffman, misleading. Furthermore, his contention that interactionism itself tends toward formalism is, in the view of this paper, incorrect.

[8] Thus, while Goffman's (1974:10) "aim is to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding in our society," Blumer (1969:148) would insist that "we do not cleave aside what gives each instance its peculiar character and restrict ourselves to what it has in common with the other instances in the class," thus precluding any such attempt.

While interactionists attempt to deal with the unfolding of actual everyday events, it is Goffman's intent to "see behind" this constant activity to what, in modern parlance, would be referred to as the "structures" that invisibly govern it. These structures Goffman now refers to us "frames," (and earlier as "occasions," and sometimes misleadingly as "situations"). Whereas a situation is described by its particular contents, especially by those elements that are unique to it and have been composed within its own existence, a frame is described by the stable rules of its operation, whatever the circumstances of any particular enactment. In other words, frames are not to be thought of as empirical in the way that situations are.[9]

In a structuralist analysis (here Goffman's), everyday life is seen to be made up of more or less well-delineated "worlds," realms of special meaning within which a particular language of reality is binding.[10] The world is a mode of experience fleshed out by adherence to the rules of a frame or occasion.

> Each class of . . . occasions possesses a distinctive ethos, a spirit, and emotional structure, that must be properly created, sustained, and laid to rest (Goffman, 1963:19)

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[8] Godelier (1973:336) provides a clear exposition of this matter from the structuralist point of view:

> "structures" should not be confused with visible "social relations" but constitute a *level of reality* invisible but present behind the visible social relations. The logic of the latter, and the laws of social practice more generally, depend on the functioning of these hidden structures and the discovery of these last should allow us to "account for all the facts observed."

[9] Because of his use of innumerable empirical examples, Goffman is often thought to be interested in a sociology of appearances (e.g., Gouldner, 1970). But, though they possibly are excessive, I believe these examples are intended always to point up the *relation* between structure and action. In this regard, note Goffman's (1961a:35, 85) crucial distinctions between, for example, "game" and "play," or "role" and "role performance."

[10] Alfred Schutz's analysis shares this method of dividing the subject matter into modes of experience that he calls "provinces of meaning," but Goffman (1974:3ff.) criticizes his handling of this job. The micro-sociologies of Schutz and ethnomethodology are not within the scope of this paper.

For Goffman, it is the world, not the situation-event, that is characterized by an analytically relevant uniqueness of cognitive and emotional style. Being in a particular world provides experience that is qualitatively different from that offered by any other world: merely different enactments of the same world are analytically indistinguishable. Goffman expresses this in an analysis of the worlds that the playing of games makes possible.

> A matrix of possible events and a cast of roles through whose enactment the events occur constitute together a field for fateful dramatic action, a plane of being, an engine of meaning, a world in itself, different from all other worlds, except the ones generated when the same game is played at other times. (Goffman, 1961a:26-7)

If the structuralist analysis identifies well-defined worlds wherein action takes place, for the interactionist the substance of everyday life is much more homogeneous. The rules the interactionist sees operating in human interaction are universal, that is, are features of all interaction, not just that of any particular realm of activity. Furthermore, these rules are not discovered in research activity, but are starting principles, applicable to the study of any setting. In other words, they are not accurately referred to as rules at all but, rather, as laws. Basically, these are the Meadian principles that humans are symbolizing beings who, in interaction, make attributions and hold out expectations of others, who in turn amalgamate these to form a self capable of formulating meaningful reciprocal lines of action. This process, symbolic interaction, underlies all realms of human activity. What differs between settings and serves to generate interest within the interactionist paradigm is the varied character of social life that may be found and the different roles that are "played" by individuals, whose apparent naivete with regard to the facts of their cultural origin seems, from within the paradigm, to be notable.

Symbolic interactionism has looked to curious manifestations of its laws and, consequently, has been criticized for its picture of social reality that overemphasizes the "exotic" (Meltzer et al., 1975:98). Now we can see that this ten-

dency is *determined* for those working within the interactionist paradigm, who seek, quite naturally, to provide illustrations that will elicit high interest. The more exotic the behaviors of subjects appear to be, the greater the sense of irony generated by the seemingly blind identifications of these actors with their social roles. Barthes' examination of the "myth of exoticism" behind much popular ethnography lends support to this description of the similar habits of interactionist studies. In this sort of ethnography, he says, it is contended that "all things are alike, . . . they are only different in hue. . . . The cultural facts are never related to a particular historical order" (could we say particular world?). Rather, each example provides the means for emoting "the theme of an eternal condition" (Barthes, 1957:94–5). So it is that what varies for interactionists and makes things interesting, is not the set of rules that guides collective action in any setting, but the changing *contents* of human roles and situations.

In their descriptions of various subcultures that are built upon the pure laws of interaction, interactionists glide over the boundaries marking off the worlds that Goffman feels as stumbling blocks. He would consider the Meadian laws of symbolic interaction as something like truisms, which leave us as theorists in a seamless world whose apparent consistency defies real analysis. His work suggests that the apparent continuity of everyday life masks a real discontinuity, the coexistence of forms of daily life showing dramatic differences in principle. Their boundaries mark not just changes in taste or style, in how naked beings are clothed, but potentially significant differences in the character and quality of everyday life.

Thus, Goffman (1974:127) attacks the interactionists: "The first issue is not interaction but frame." Too easily, he says, "the term 'interaction' equally applies to everything one might want to distinguish," but this simple application "conceals the analysis that would be required to make sense out of this interaction" in the first place (Goffman, 1974:127). One cannot claim to have reached a scientific understanding of a strip of interaction,

says Goffman, unless one has worked out an understanding of the rules of the frame in which this interaction takes place. This latter understanding has been unconscious for the interactionists, who, like ordinary participants, have brought unexamined prior knowledge of background rules to the settings they have studied. Consequently, they have described variations of behavior within particular frames without acknowledging the set of rules and structured social relations that make the existence of such forms of activity possible.[11] To take Goffman's own example of this point, interactionists have gone to the theatre and studied such a phenomenon as performer-audience interaction without having come to recognize the system of conventions that brings into existence a "stage" (a new "plane of being") and a cast of "characters" who can behave without the ordinary consequences for their self-images.

Those who have studied the process of "defining the situation," then, mostly have ignored the micro-structures within which this informal, and (in a structuralist view) largely inconsequential, activity of defining takes place. But Goffman's study of everyday life has made these frames its focus. It asks about the central working principles that animate any particular mode of activity. "Frame analysis" is the attempt to become cognizant of the rules for cognition and communication that are bound up with the production of any world. Goffman's contribution to structuralism is his application of this method, almost unannounced, not to works of art or literature or to myth, but to the various "media" of everyday life, which constitute for him its different "genre" (Hymes, 1975), that is, forms of mundane activity characterized by stable rules of operation and understanding.

The Precariousness of "Situations"

Realizing that within a culture there is a great deal of uniformity in the manner in which particular activities are collectively

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[11] See Godelier (1972:xv–xvi) for a terse account of the logically similar Marxist-structuralist critique of classical economics.

carried out—that a wedding, for example, is, in our society, always very much the same—interactionists have felt it necessary to make reference in their work to a distinction that is possible between "predetermined" and "spontaneous" definitions of the situation (Thomas, 1972:332) or, in the same vein, between "rigid" and "pliable" ones (Stone and Farberman, 1970:150). Favoring the former pole of this distinction, there are those "role theorists" who have emphasized the cultural as opposed to the situational origins of these definitions. It will be necessary later in the paper to show why this concession does not make their analyses structuralist, as some commentators have suggested (e.g., Stokes and Hewitt, 1976).

For now, we should see that this tendency of some role theorists to emphasize the stable and cultural aspects of definitions resists the main pull of symbolic interactionism.[12] The insistence, by interactionists, on an approach focusing on "process" (e.g., Stone and Farberman, 1970:150, passim) has led them to favor the second pole of the above-mentioned distinction. Thus, as Stokes and Hewitt (1976:840) say, "The focus and strength of interactionist theory is an emphasis on people's capacity to create meaning and order in the process of interaction." The elementary unit of social life within the paradigm, the situation, is not constituted of imposed formal rules, but informal ones, devised from within for the duration of its short life. Its character, it is often stated, is ongoingly "negotiated," always freshly accomplished. Seen as the ephemeral construction of social actors who are co-present and engaged in interaction, the situation is conceived as a *precarious* state. At any moment, it exists as a delicate and alterable balance of human (and physical) factors, the very "reality" of which can depend, we are told, on simple belief, i.e., its definition as real by participants.[13]

To Goffman, it is unthinkable that social reality might undergo a construction or reconstruction at every encounter. As opposed to the once-only understandings associated with situations, frames represent the worlds that are commonly "available" to members of a culture, and routinely "realized" through adherence to their conventions (Goffman, 1961a:41,28).

> We cannot say the worlds are created on the spot because, whether we refer to a game of cards or to teamwork during surgery, use is usually made of traditional equipment having a social history of its own in the wider society. . . . (Goffman, 1961a:27–8)

The structure of a frame, unlike that of a situation, is fixed and left essentially untouched by everyday events. Thus, when some commentators (Gouldner, 1970; Collins and Makowsky, 1972; Manning, 1976) insist that Goffman depicts a social reality that is precarious and fragile, we must specify that it is the individual's security and *sense* of reality that, in Goffman's world, may be so described, not the social structure. Any world is an objective reality, whatever the status of its participants' belief in it (Goffman, 1974:4–7). Variable definitions of this reality "contribute very marginally to the events in progress" (Goffman, 1974:1).

It is significant in this regard that Goffman sees the rules of frame as analogous to the syntactical structures of language (Goffman, 1974:11–2, 236). In this he shares a property crucial to most versions of contemporary structuralism, "the belief that all manifestations of social reality . . . that are practised in any society constitute languages in the formal sense" (Lane, 1970:13–4). The characteristic of language most salient to the present discussion is its stable and given structure. Its rules are left virtually unchanged by speech-events. Similarly, argues Goffman, social actors do not fiddle endlessly with the way their everyday worlds are built, nor need they explicitly recapitulate

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[12] J. Turner (1974:151–92) makes the distinction between symbolic interactionism and role theory clear. Also see Robin (1974).

[13] Peter Berger's frequent usage of the word "precarious" to describe social reality is precisely this one, which is no accident. His work (Berger and

Luckmann, 1966:19) is also an attempt at "a sociological analysis of the reality of everyday life." In that analysis, Thomas' "definition of the situation" becomes Berger and Luckmann's "definition of reality." This serves to cast the analysis at a societal (rather than situational) level, but major portions of the interactionist conceptual apparatus hold.

the rules for understanding each time they act.

> Presumably, a "definition of the situation" is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not *create* this definition, even though their society can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly. (Goffman, 1974:1-2)

By ignoring frame, interactionists have had to hold to the position that nothing is understood by social actors that has not been communicated outwardly, or dramatized (e.g., Perinbanayagam, 1975). It is supposed that shared understandings surrounding every matter contingent to the actors' present project must begin in interaction, i.e., have an accomplished character. For Goffman, on the contrary, the basis of any realm of activity lies in a preexisting system of rules. It is simply inconceivable, from this point of view, that every element on which a situation is grounded be established within its bounds and, in the case of many of its features, not feasible because the actors' understanding is unconscious. Furthermore, to assume that any one such element could be defined in isolation from the others overlooks the systemic nature of the relations between them.

That the interactionists can think of situations as built up piece-by-piece is possible because these entities are thought of as constituted of an innumerable number of elements, amalgamated during the ongoing process of interaction, having no definite arrangement, and among them no relations of dominance. Stone and Farberman (1970:151fn) thus can tell us that they have thought of more than fifty such elements that make up a typical situation.[14] These elements, they say, are "assembled, arranged, manipulated, [and] controlled" (Stone and Farberman, 1970:151) by participants in defining a situation. Any real-life situation is unique, then, because of its once only configuration of elements. And, within interac-

tionism, there will be no reference to certain of these elements as being ultimately determinant within any situation. Rather, a theoretical parity is assumed between them.[15]

From Goffman's analyses of particular framed activities, we can derive certain principle characteristics of frames. A frame is not conceived as a loose, somewhat accidental amalgamation of elements put together over a short time-span. Rather, it is constituted of a set number of essential components, having a definite arrangement and stable relations. These components are not gathered from here and there, as are the elements of a situation, but are always found together as a system. The standard components cohere and are complete: that is, together they represent a potential world that answers all questions about what it is that shall be taken by participants as real, and how it is that they should be involved in this reality. Other less essential elements are present in any empirical instance and lend some of their character to the whole, yet these are of necessarily minor importance relative to the basic configuration of components that govern the action. In all this, frames are very close in conception to "structures" as discussed by Piaget (1970) and Althusser and Balibar (1970).

As has been suggested, it is inherent in the nature of the task that interactionists have set for themselves—constrained by the imperative to demonstrate the emergence of definitions during interaction—that the situation be considered extremely malleable. In fact, because its members are granted a "nearly complete flexibility in the form and direction of conduct," the situation seems in conception to be infinitely variable. "The image conveyed is of [the] virtually limitless creation of culture" (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976:840). Since a situation entails no central principle of organization, no set of fixed relations at its heart, its participants presumably may redefine its loosely bound elements one at a time, incrementally changing its overall char-

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[14] Stebbins (1967:156,158) also refers to the "great many factors" that have a role in the composition of a situation, and he lists some of them. See also Stebbins (1972).

[15] Compare Weber's very similar understanding of a historical "situation" as described by Aron (1970:235-47).

acter. A frame, though, would seem not to be subject to the gradual changes brought about by continued redefinition. Although change processes are very much under-examined by Goffman, a frame's invariant status implies that change occurs at some point by rapid mutation. With a great enough reworking of frame, we have done more than redefined a situation; we have destroyed a world.

"Structuralist" versus "Cultural" Orientations

I have referred to the emphasis placed by some role theorists upon widely-held cultural definitions of the situation, that is, on norms and values held collectively prior to the time a situation convenes. This is a viewpoint often termed "structural," and, sometimes, quite inappropriately, as we will see, as "structuralist," as, for example, in the recent article by Stokes and Hewitt (1976). In this section, I will discuss the important ways in which Goffman's approach departs from this "structural" or "cultural" one, even as it departs simultaneously from the interactionist approach (within which, incidentally, Stokes and Hewitt place Goffman with respect to their dichotomous "structuralist-interactionist" classification scheme).

Cultural definitions come about, it seems, from the accounts of some theorists, in the same manner as do the more ephemeral or situational kind, that is, through the interaction of individual social units. Thus, Stebbins (1967:158) speaks of them as having "developed from the interrelationship of many similar personal definitions." Such cultural definitions form the necessary consensus upon which any working social reality is seen to depend (Stone and Farberman, 1970:152; Perinbanayagam, 1974).

Frame analysis is in opposition to these views in at least two ways. First, "framing conventions," the set of rules governing an activity, are not seen as having arisen through a conscious, interactive process. Second, and more important in what follows, frame analysis rejects the picture of culture as given by role theorists, specifically the quality of near-perfect consis-

tency attributed to it when seen in the above-stated fashion—that is, as a large situation.

Within the cultural approach, the situations that embody a culture at any moment all reflect that culture's core values, as well as the principles of operation of the whole, which can be described as pluralistic. Each situation is seen as a mediating fluid between culture and the individual. It serves to transmit culture in two directions. First, it provides a medium of socialization where cultural norms and values materialize, i.e., are made real for the individual (Thomas, 1972). Hence, in this model, culture is ultimately the explanation of conduct as, within interactionism, it is the sum of the influences of co-present others (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976:839). Second, the incalculable number of situations serve as so many collecting devices for the inputs that individual actors make to the cultural "definition of the situation." In either direction of this flow, the transmission is true, clear and unimpeded.

The notion of frame allows Goffman a much different picture of culture and its consistency. Everyday activities are not simple reflections of the broader culture's organization and values. The boundary, or "membrane," between a focused activity system and the wider society is a screen which "not only selects but also transforms and modifies what is passed through it" (Goffman, 1961a:33). As Manning (1976:16fn) has noted, "since Goffman . . . sees the situated encounter as being 'tied' to the larger social structure through what he calls transformation rules, he does not adopt the Parsonian view that each relationship is patterned by a set of pre-established normative orientations." Though each framed activity is embedded in the organization of the wider society and owes its existence to the functioning of the whole, a close view of it does not provide a description of the greater system. There may be a difference, Goffman tells us, between, say, the distribution of substantive rights and power in a society and that which we find in the structure of a certain kind of encounter (Goffman, 1961a:34fn). Social action is contained, then, within micro-structures that have an

integrity as systems in their own right. Society is a "framework of frames" (Goffman, 1974).

What guides conduct in this structuralist model is not a set of shady core values or the influence of others who are co-present, but the individual's place within the formal social organization of a concrete activity, or, to put it differently, one's place with respect to the social relations of production of a ritual world. In comparison with this, an examination of Stokes and Hewitt's (1976) attempt to resolve the "parallel weaknesses" of the cultural and interactionist approaches must conclude that it offers no real alternative to these. Stokes and Hewitt simply give recognition to both "culture" and "others" as factors that influence conduct, thus paying homage at once to both the cultural and interactionist approaches, which, respectively, point to one of these two realities as that with which actions need be "aligned." Like these other approaches, they leave wholly unrecognized the structured "activity system" (or frame) within which everyday action, in Goffman's approach, takes place. In this way, Stokes and Hewitt succumb to the persistent belief that culture (meaning) and action are "all there is."

For the role theorist and the interactionist, then, culture is composed of activity-situations all operating on the same basic principles and carrying the same messages, reflections of one another and of the whole. But in the structuralist conception, each realm of activity exhibits, as a system, rules and understandings that may be in contradiction with those of other realms or with the greater society.

> Where the social content of a situated system faithfully expresses in miniature the structure of the broader social organization in which it is located, then little change in the traditional role analysis is necessary; . . . But where a discrepancy is found, we would be in a position to show proper respect for it. (Goffman, 1961a:99)

In the structuralist model, it is in such discrepancy or incompatibility between the structures composing a system, where the potential lies for social transformation (Godelier, 1972:ix).

We can now see that role theorists who orient themselves to structure or culture and symbolic interactionists who emphasize process merely study from opposite ends what both see as a pluralistic and consensual society. Goffman's structuralism, while under the influence of both these other schools of thought, actually fits neither model and must remain misunderstood by those who would force it into one or the other.

Subjectivity and Meaning

I will return to the matter of exploring the divergence of the structuralist and interactionist approaches to the study of everyday life, now examining more traditional issues than those treated thus far: the place of subjectivity and meaning in analysis, and the ontological status of the self.

To gather the real importance of the role of subjective orientations within interactionism, it is helpful to return to the early development of this perspective. The formula known as the "definition of the situation" was conceived by Thomas in the 1920s in order to facilitate an understanding of the behavior of the individual social actor (Meltzer et al., 1975:22). It referred to the meaning an individual gave to his/her immediate circumstances, the interpretation one made of them. This definition was meant as one very important factor in the determination of the individual's behavior. Different behavioral responses could be seen as the result of variations in subjective definitions of the situation.

For the next generation as well, the focus of interactionism, in fact that of much of American sociology, remained "the person's behavior in the group" (Gorden, 1952:58), or "the relationship between . . . definition and behavior in the situation" (Stebbins, 1967:149).[16] And, because it was the actor's subjective assessment of the situation that was seen as the most salient determinant of be-

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[16] Cottrell (1950:711) could say, in his 1950 presidential address to the ASA that, "Indeed, sociology can be thought of as a discipline devoted to the analysis of social situations."

havior, it was this mental construction that became the object of intensive study. Despite Thomas and Thomas' (1970:154–5) early warning that analyses should be done "not without regard to the factual elements in the situation," the "objective situation," as Stebbins (1967) termed it, came to be seen, quite inevitably, as negligible, since it was not to this unmediated reality that social actors responded (Perinbanayagam, 1974:523). It is the "subjective situation," stated Stebbins (1967:151), this "construction of the person's world, that is of concern to sociologists [because] it will affect [the individual's] action orientations." For his part, Stebbins (1967:151) announces what is usually implicit in interactionist studies: "In this paper the term situation will refer to the subjective kind unless stated otherwise." The tradition of interactionism had ruled out the objective conditions surrounding social action as a possible realm of scientific interest.

Interactionists, then, consider it to have been unquestionably established by their forebears that the starting point for any social analysis is the meaning that actors give to their situation. Thus, Perinbanayagam (1974:523) seems to feel that he is expressing more than just an analytical predilection when he states that "one is condemned . . . to a world of meanings." What he actually *does* express is the nature of his confinement within the interactionist paradigm. Of course, as Perinbanayagam suggests, an approach cast steadfastly at the level of meaning can be mobilized to an analysis of other than the behavior of individual actors within social situations:

> We may fruitfully treat all human communicated material as "texts" (spoken, written, and I may add, carved, sculpted, painted, hieroglyphed, symbolized, emblemized, dramatized, filmed) and apply the same methods of interpretation and understanding. (Perinbanayagam, 1974:538)

But, if taken seriously, such an approach would entirely eliminate Goffman's present program of study, as outlined in *Frame Analysis*. For him, each of the above-mentioned media of expression presents a "code" (Goffman, 1974:7) to be cracked, an unconscious system of

categories and rules governing the creation and communication of meaning. It is the task of analytically recovering these grammatical systems that Goffman has set for himself. For him, the meanings transmitted via each of the media cannot be thought of as commensurate, as the quotation implies, for, implicitly contained within each, lies its more decisive "message," a formal system of social organization.

For interactionism, the focus on meaning is linked, as we have seen, to its conventional assumption that "everyday behavior is a 'direct' indication of [the actor's] inner state, of the doer's being" (Davis, 1975:601). Goffman, in the tradition of structuralism, inverts this understanding by making the subjective aspect of action subsidiary, an "after-effect." Any outward indication "is itself the substance, not the shadow" (Goffman, 1974:463).[11] The actual pattern of determination, then, according to Goffman, is just the reverse of how, in our society (and in interactionism), it is perceived (Goffman, 1974:462–3). It is the activity of producing a particular world that generates a characteristic set of "inner states" for its participants. The pattern of their occurrence—when and for whom they shall be felt, as well as how they are to be expressed—is a determined aspect of the operation of any established kind of activity-system. Individuals infer the subjectivity proper to their roles in such a system by applying current doctrines concerning how they are to be related to their acts. Conventions regarding the nature of these "linkages" between acts and actors are a feature of the rules of any frame (see Gonos, 1976:200–1).

It follows from his estimation of the place of subjective orientations that Goffman's methodology necessarily differs from that employed in the study of situations. Because the situation is, in large part, a subjective reality, the means of its investigation lie most naturally in the Weberian method of *Verstehen*, the em-

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[11] Levi-Strauss (1963:68–70) similarly inverts the relationship between inner-states and their outward manifestations that he finds postulated in certain functionalist theories.

pathetic grasp of the social actor's understanding of the situation and his/her typical intentions within it. Documentation of these inner states may be sought through questionnaires, intensive interviews, or in natural dialogue.

Though for interactionists it is the only means of entry into the situation, Goffman does not wish for purposes of research to "take the role" of a participant in a setting (Goffman, 1974:8–10). Because his interest is largely in the unintentional properties (or syntax) of systems of activity, he can, for the most part, disregard what interactionists take to be the most important source of data, the meanings attached by actors to their situations. The rules for cognition and conduct by means of which an activity is actually produced and understood, as these are conceived of within structuralism, cannot be discovered in the consciousness of its participants, through an intersubjectivity. Thus, Goffman maintains a deep conviction about the uselessness of attending to actors' subjectivity and holds a special distrust of verbal admissions of motives.

> When an individual speaks –formally or informally—sometimes what he seems to be doing is voicing an opinion, expressing a wish, desire, or inclination, conveying his attitude, and the like. These attestations of the existence of what are taken to be inner states have a relevant feature: they can be as little established as disconfirmed. (Goffman, 1974:502–3)

It is clear why Goffman's methodology, though following in its prejudices those of Durkheim, should seem mysterious, or even licentious, to some commentators. It is because his interest resides in what, for interactionists, is that forbidden terrain, the "objective situation" or, as MacIver put it, in "the situation as it might appear to some omniscient and disinterested eye" (quoted by Stebbins, 1967:150).

The "Self"

The interactionist perspective posits individual selves as the elementary, even the primal social entities, that is, existing prior to social structure. Mead, according to Blumer (1969:62), "saw the human being as an organism having a self." The

interactionist version of the "myth of creation" proceeds from the existence of selves (having certain predispositions) to the establishment, through interaction, of a social order. Situations and society are conceived of as "individual-generated". (Meltzer et al., 1975:24).

The starting point of this process, usually left unspoken, is called by Waller the "undefined situation," apparently not subject to any external constraints. For example, from Waller's *Sociology of Teaching:*

> We see many undefined situations confronting the individual in the school. The new teacher confronts a situation wholly undefined, and he has very little idea as to the details of the definition that would be desirable from his point of view. The experienced teacher who faces a new class faces an undefined situation, and it is part of his job to impose his definition of the situation on the class quickly, before any alternatives have had an opportunity to be considered. (Waller, 1970:166)

Such a definition, Waller says, will establish, for example, whether the teacher will be "friendly" or "dominating" (Waller, 1970:166). Now, it is certainly true that such latitudes in work-style are allowed the schoolteacher and may indeed be discussed under the rubric of the definition of the situation.[18] But, in the structuralist view, they must be thought of as fine points of adjustment within a system whose most fundamental rules are well-established and essentially nonnegotiable in our society, that of the classroom. This frame consists of a set of parameters for the student-teacher relationship, a peculiar conception of the nature of knowledge, a constricting system of grading and credit

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[18] It would be mistaken to understand the idea of frame as parallel in purpose to that of situation and, thus, as simply a substitute for the latter. Frame analysis retains a place for the notion of situation, as any concrete circumstance, but gives priority to the study of frames, which exist at another "hidden" level. Thus, in Goffman's analysis, factors are labeled "situational" that do not have a "continued consequence" (Goffman, 1974:426) beyond their present circumstances, in terms of frame, "(S)heer volume of commotion and furor is not what signifies, but again, it is frame relevance that counts" (Goffman, 1974:427). There is no equivalent distinction within interactionism.

which stratifies the student body and introduces power relationships, a customary physical arrangement, etc. Waller's approach, interactionism, effaces all this in beginning with a postulated "undefined situation" on which, presumably, actors may imprint their own notions of the classroom. Necessarily, then, Waller's description of the process of defining that ensues is surreptitiously narrowed in scope to focus on the teacher's actual rule-making capacity (see Waller, 1970:171). Consequently, the system of formal relations that is constituted by the classroom must go unexamined, while Waller, in the manner of interactionist studies, begins his analysis with nothing but selves.

Ultimately, then, the character of any situation is the result of the unique meeting of particular individuals and their combined effects on one another. In this conception, the sheer number of individuals present becomes important, as do arrivals and departures (Stebbins, 1967:153–8). Other individuals, not social structure or even norms, are seen as the greatest influence on social actors.

> The attitudes of others are, in fact, the most important limitations upon the behavior of any one person, and they are also the most important inducements to any particular action. The attitudes of others are dynamic elements in the undefined situation which presents itself to any individual, and as a result of those attitudes the individual may come to define the situation in one way and not in another. Therefore we may say that one person defines the situation for another. (Waller, 1970:163)

In the interactionist analysis, then, differences in experience seem often to depend not so much on the realm in which interaction occurs as on whom an individual is with. The process of defining the situation consists of "the fitting together of the lines of behavior of the separate participants," resulting in what Blumer called "joint action."

For Goffman, everyday social encounters do not pose the problem of coordination, because they are examples of the ritualized reproduction of cultural objects according to preestablished formulae. Here, the primary forces exerted

on social actors do not come from other individuals.

> The concept of interaction is thus transformed: instead of referring to mutual influence that might be peripheral and trivial, it now refers to a highly structured form of mutual fatefulness. (Goffman, 1961a:35)

For Goffman, say Glaser and Strauss (1972:457), "interaction proceeds to its termination almost as inexorably as a Greek tragedy."

Such imagery reflects the fact that a structuralist analysis, such as Goffman's, assumes a different starting point than that of interactionism. To employ one current means of expressing this, we can say that it does not "start with" social actors, but with the socially given frame that exists prior to these individuals, who are called upon to give it life. The language of frame analysis suggests that, in a very real sense, individual selves do not exist except for a tenuous social reality that certain frames bestow upon them. Self, here, is not an entity, as the interactionist perspective has it, but a dramatic effect. When and in what manner the self appears is an artifact of the operation of particular activity-systems, "not a result of some organic expressive carry-over from actor to actions" (Goffman, 1974:297). Goffman has, in different ways, always suggested that the appearance of self lies in a relationship, that it is conveyed through a discrepancy between structure and action (see esp. Goffman, 1961a:85–152; 1961b:320; 1974:292–300; Gonos, 1976: 200–9). There is more than a hint that the issue of self only arises in our own historical epoch (Goffman, 1967:47–95). Far from grounding his analysis in the existence of individual selves, as is gathered by many commentators from a reading of the *Presentation of Self* (1959), Goffman has almost single-handedly among American micro-sociologists worked to undermine this possible grounding.[19]

The concepts "situation" and "frame" thus imply very different understandings of the place of the individual in analysis,

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[19] Note Balibar's similar determination to eliminate from social theory "as a foreign body" the idea of "men" (Althusser and Balibar, 1970:207).

Interactionists emphasize the world-building capacities of people in everyday situations and look to them as the source of social change, while the concept of frame leads Goffman to think of individuals as "supports" for the continued existence of social structures. They are "resources" or "materials" called upon to bring forms of activity to life: "human nature" simply "fits the frame" (Goffman, 1974:516).

Conclusion

Whereas interactionism objects to the "oversocialized conception of man" (Stone and Farberman, 1970:13) and emphasizes voluntarism, Goffman's individuals are aptly described as "sociological to the core" (Davis, 1975:601). What interactionists can be seen to glorify in sentimental manner as personal style, Goffman wishes to dignify as subject matter for a strict sociological analysis. Interactionism is charming because it retains a split picture for the analysis of everyday affairs and macro-social structures; thus, its easy coexistence with functionalism. Conversely, it is the understanding of daily activities as manifestations of social structure, a single picture so to speak, that enables Goffman to carry on his life-work, "to combat the touching tendency to keep a part of the world safe from sociology" (Goffman, 1961a:152)—a tendency, he suggests, that is very much alive within interactionism.

Goffman's work tells us that it is the reality of frame, not fashions of behavior, that the sociological study of everyday life must explicate, lest all modes appear to us as the same, as human interaction in different dress. It remains for us to analyze the place of the frames of everyday life within political and economic systems, the frames at another level of organization. This is the possibility that Goffman's work affords—the incorporation of micro-sociology into sociology proper.

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