Erving Goffman (1922-1982) created a framework for examining how people manage the complex interactions of everyday life; by focusing on what he understood as social routines and face-saving practices, he paid attention to the obligations and expectations that govern ordinary interactions, to how obligations and expectations are breached, and to how participants attempt to repair offenses and possible harm to social status. In his 1984 essay “Goffman Reconsidered: Pros and Players,” Roger Abrahams called Goffman “the philosopher-poet of modernity in the mid-twentieth century, of mobilized people whose daily lives are less and less affected by home and community” (p. 80).

Works

*Forms of Talk*

In his 1981 work *Forms of Talk*, Goffman described his work as “the naturalistic study of human foregatherings and comminglings, that is, the forms and occasions of face-to-face interaction” (p. 162). This excerpt, from his subtly argued, densely layered metacommunicative essay “The Lecture,” provides a guide for considering an appropriately Goffmanesque encyclopedia entry on his work. Goffman was explicitly critical of the unchallenged use of biographical detail in an entry such as this. Several scholars have valiantly attempted to provide the information that Goffman was reluctant to offer. It is not that Goffman wanted the work to stand on its own but rather that he was profoundly interested in the forms of communication that we take for granted (such as encyclopedia entries and lectures, among many others). In this, he drew on phenomenology and its interest in everyday life, but what often served as anecdotes in phenomenological discussions were topics for scrutiny for Goffman.

*Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

Goffman referred to the fundamental forms of interaction as “the interaction order,” observable in face-to-face interaction in everyday life. He introduced these ideas in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, first published in 1956 and revised in 1959, based on his doctoral dissertation fieldwork in the Shetland Islands. As a student of Lloyd Warner, Goffman might have been expected to write about the larger social structure of the community. Instead, he focused on the multiple and complex interactions between locals, tourists, hotel workers, and others to understand how people take up a variety of roles to negotiate different sorts of encounters. *Presentation of Self* explores how people manage what they imagine to be the impressions others have of them. Participants define the situations they are in, assess the particular frame of the interaction, and present themselves accordingly.

Through attention to interaction and to face-to-face encounters, Goffman developed a performative approach that led to several key frameworks, including an interactional concept of self and personhood and the notion of frame as a central feature of how people assess the obligations and expectations of particular situations. For Goffman, the presentation of self is produced through interaction. His concept of the self is not an interior psychological state but instead is performed, situated, and relational. Like Judith Butler (more than a decade later), Goffman in his 1979 work *Gender Advertisements* argued, “There is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender” (p. 8), in which
individuals learn how to read and produce the signs of belonging to a particular gender. His understanding of self is often tied to the concept of face, as in saving face, and the “face-work” of managing relationships. In 1967, Goffman wrote,

> To study face-saving is to study the traffic rules of social interaction; one learns about the code the person adheres to in his movement across the paths and designs of others, but not where he is going, or why he wants to get there. (p. 12)

Goffman undertook extensive observations of how people manage the damage done to their self-image and demonstrated how people manage breaches through remedial interchanges that can acknowledge the departure from expectations, offer a remedy to an offense, or shift the frame.

**Asylums**

In his 1961 observations of “total institutions” (asylums, mental hospitals, prisons, etc.), Goffman described how “territories of the self are violated; the boundary that the individual places between his being and the environment is invaded and the embodiments of self profaned” (p. 23). He observed that total institutions purport to extend surveillance to every dimension of a person's experience but that they inevitably also, sometimes inadvertently, provide “free spaces” in which surveillance is reduced. These exceptions, seemingly outside both the typical researcher's and the institution's awareness, prove to be central to our understanding of how an institution works; they show the interactions among participants in the institution to be performances, subject to the constraints of the situation rather than an indication of the inmates’ abilities, limitations, or character flaws.

**Stigma**

Goffman's discussion of the concept of stigma further developed his understanding of the situational, interactional relationships attributed to and inscribed on individuals. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) presaged contemporary discussions of normalcy, especially as a critique of the adequacy of the concept of deviance. The work has been controversial among sociologists who have critiqued Goffman's interactional approach as insufficiently attending to the power relations underlying social inequities. Goffman argued that the interaction order was itself constitutive of, rather than epiphenomenal to, social structure. He rejected any neat mapping of social structure onto interaction rituals and instead suggested that the larger economical, racial, and class-based social structural relationships became relevant to and were observable in particular interaction patterns.

Recently, Goffman's work on stigma has become center stage in disability studies' rethinking of concepts of normalcy and ability. By locating stigma in interaction, rather than in the biological or cultural attributes of persons, Goffman provided observations of how stigmatizing categories are integrally connected to other social systems. Blindness, deafness, or using a wheelchair is only disabling if it discredits a person’s warrant to participate in a particular interaction. Goffman's concept of stigma differentiates between the discredited and the discreditable, those already categorized as deviant and those vulnerable to becoming stigmatized. As part of this argument, Goffman explored the concept of the ally (useful, e.g., to describe people who identify as allies of those stigmatized for their sexual preferences); the allies take up the case of those who are stigmatized and then, often, are stigmatized themselves.

Philip Manning has credited Goffman with introducing the concept of “identity politics,” but Goffman's...
1963 discussion of the politics of identity actually offers a critique of the kind of essentialized identity later described by this concept. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman pointed out that “phantom acceptance” of “phantom normalcy” in practice provided only a very conditional veneer for performing tolerance.

**Interaction Ritual**

Goffman offered numerous terms and categories to describe the complexity of interaction. Some of the most significant of these are his concepts of information state, frame, footing, replaying, and front and back stage. Early in his work, he discussed the inadequacy of the familiar dyad of speaker and hearer to understand interaction. Alternatively, he proposed four participant possibilities (animator, author, figure, and principal—who stands behind the position put forth) and differentiations among the participants in an exchange, for example, among hearers, ratified hearers, and unratified hearers.

This work on the participants in an interaction helped replace less precise terms such as *role*. Similarly, Goffman's work on alignment or “footing” affords precise attention to both the social categories people adopt or are ascribed to as well as the ways participants shift among categories. In narrative research, the concept of alignment has proven useful for describing how narrators position themselves and their characters in relation to each other and in relation to listeners.

Frameworks such as these continue to be applied in new ways, beyond the situations Goffman described. His work on participants in an interaction, footing, frame, and replaying (among other concepts) continues to be influential in narrative research.

**Frame Analysis**

*Frame Analysis*, which some biographers report to be the work that Goffman expected to be his crowning achievement, complicated his earlier work by adding a dimension of reflexivity, or meta-awareness, to his understanding of interaction. Frames define situations as one kind or another. The problem of frame, building on Gregory Bateson's work, begins with the concept of genre, or the type of communication. Contextualization cues are framing devices. These cues are crucial for understanding how to interpret a particular message. The same information and/or experiences can be “reframed” or repackaged, in other forms (a request can be reframed as a joke, an invitation can be framed as a summons, etc.), significantly changing the import and meaning of the message.

As part of his work on frame, Goffman distinguished between reports of past events and “replayings,” which involve “vicariously re-experiencing what took place.” Goffman's interactional approach to narrative takes into account questions of reported speech and other forms of repetition, including the conditions for the repeated telling of a story and for the suspenseful recounting of a story, in which a teller might withhold information and the listeners would permit it. For example, he observed that in some situations, tellers are permitted to retell a story as if it is the first telling, as long as there is a listener who has not already heard it.

The concept of frame is part of a larger interactional model that identifies varieties of situations and strategies for negotiating among them. He differentiates among (a) primary frames; (b) keys, which reformulate the primary frame, for example, when something is rekeyed as a rehearsal rather than the actual performance; and (c) fabrications, in which participants try to convince others, through persuasion, playfulness, or duplicity, that something is other than it is, for example, that a con game is a legitimate exchange. Multiple frames can operate at the same time, and participants can change their
footing in relation to these frames. In related work, he proposed the concepts of back stage and front stage to offer elaboration of categories such as formal and informal or public and private. In Goffman's work, these are not discreet zones but rather are accounts of the different requirements and expectations demanded by situations.

These observations about narrative interaction are tied to what Goffman called “information states”: assessments of others’ knowledge and strategies based on those assessments. He defined information state as “the knowledge an individual has of why events have happened as they have, what the current forces are, what the properties and intents of the relevant persons are, and what the outcome is likely to be” (p. 133). In brief, each character at each moment is accorded an orientation, a temporal perspective, a “horizon.” For instance, Goffman provides the example of a con operation where the dupe does not know that he is going to happen upon someone who will become his confederate and that they both will in turn meet someone who seems to be a dupe.

Goffman has been criticized for his dramaturgical approach, his use of theater metaphors for exploring interactional encounters. However, in his 1974 work *Frame Analysis*, he specifically insisted that “All the world is not a stage”; and in *Forms of Talk*, he argued that he made no claim that social life was a stage, only that elements of theatricality were deeply incorporated into the nature of talking.

**Goffman's Legacy**

It is easier to chart the fields that Goffman has influenced than to identify his genealogy. Several disciplines claim him and continue to utilize his concepts of interaction. Although he was trained as a sociologist, particularly influenced by Émile Durkheim and George Herbert Mead, biographers note other disciplinary connections and influences, including his engagement with film studies at the University of Toronto, his work with the game theorist Thomas Schelling, and his dialogues with conversational and discourse analysts, including John Gumperz at the University of California, Berkeley, and Dell Hymes at the University of Pennsylvania, where Goffman also had a profound influence on the field of folklore. In response to the critique of Goffman's work as not addressing the politics of power and hierarchy underlying social interaction, scholars such as Roger Abrahams and Patricia Clough have recognized the subversive dimension of his work. Goffman can be seen as a cultural/social/political critic who demonstrated how subordination works by calling attention both to how subversion is enacted and to how the subordinated are called on to perform their prescribed roles.

A Goffmanesque understanding of an encyclopedia entry would observe that it is an ultimately failed effort to make connections between a scholar's life, work, and influences and that it is meant to offer facts rather than, for example, interpretations or anecdotes. The author of the entry has been selected for some authority, but that is to be assumed rather than claimed—unlike, for example, the preface of a book written by another author who might describe her relationship as a point of entry and connection. Goffman exhorted us to pay attention to these taken-for-granted assumptions about genre and form. Using his own interactional approach, we might observe that Goffman never drew his readers into his own biographical narrative and rarely described his intersections with other scholars. At times, he explicitly differentiated himself from particular schools of thought. His work continues to be central to the study of everyday life.

**See also** Bateson, Gregory; Butler, Judith; Durkheim, Émile; Gumperz, John J.; Hymes, Dell; Mead, George Herbert
Further Readings


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