Goffman and Butler: two complementary approaches for understanding a queer social interaction

Consider the following social interaction.

Participant One: *"Hey! You big queer!"*

Participant Two: *"Yes, I am queer. What is it to you?"*

What are the cultural meanings being deployed in this interaction? What are the social constructs being upheld? How are the two related? By way of answering these questions, let's consider how Judith Butler and Erving Goffman would approach them.

For Butler the interaction described above is an instance of the affirmative resignification of the term "queer" by the person whom it aims to degrade; her analysis is primarily cultural and focuses on the sets of meanings being exchanged by the participants. For Goffman this is an example of face-work in which Participant Two is saving face by denying the threatening nature of the first participant's remark; Goffman focuses on the social processes of the interaction. Through these two perspectives we will examine the processes at work in the interaction above. In turn, this examination will illuminate the notions of the cultural and social in Goffman and Butler's works, as well as, how they interact to produce cultural and social change.

Goffman

In his essay "On Face-Work" Goffman focuses on the structure and processes of social interactions. The organizing element in a social interaction is the "line" that each participant takes on; that is the "pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he expresses his view of the situation and through this evaluation of the participants, especially himself" (5). Related to the concept of a line, is the idea of "face", which is the "positive social value a person effectively claims for himself" (5). As a social interaction unfolds, participants attempt to maintain their face by adopting a particular line; this is called face-work. In our example, Participant One adopts a line of hostility toward the other participant by putting forth unfavorable information about her. Through this hostile remark Participant One aims to assert his own favorable, or normative, status relative to Participant Two, thus staking out a particular face. Participant Two adopts a self-confident line with Participant One by ignoring the threatening meaning of the term "queer" and claiming it as a positive or neutral evaluation, thus saving face.

In order to understand the above interaction an observer must be familiar with the meanings exchanged by the participants. Both parties use the term "queer", however, it has vastly different meanings in each usage. In the first statement "queer" is intended to convey scorn, while in the retort the term is embraced, and thus neutralized, by the speaker. Goffman acknowledges the necessity of understanding the manipulation of meanings in social interactions. In fact, he seems to consider this an obvious prerequisite for implementing face-work, and does not give it much more consideration (13). We can deduce that Goffman would relegate meaning to the cultural realm. He writes,

> Each person, subculture, and society seems to have its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices. It is to this

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> repertoire that people partly refer when they ask what a person or culture is really like. And yet the particular set of practices stressed by particular persons or groups seems to be drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices. (13)

Thus the particular type of face-work practiced, and presumably the meaning attributed to it, is a function of the culture in which it occurs. However, the range of possible cultural expressions is constrained by the social framework governing all social interactions. In this manner Goffman defines a relationship between the cultural and the social realms, as well as, a line of cleavage between the two. In the rest of his essay, Goffman focuses on defining the social framework that governs social interactions.

A primary theme developed in Goffman's theory of social interactions is the "functional fitness between the socialized person and spoken interaction" (40). A person socialized in the rules of social interaction will uphold the rituals of face-work in the interest of maintaining his own face. Conversely, the rules of social interaction are designed to help participants maintain face. However, should participants fail to follow the social rules, they will suffer loss of face. In fact a social face is only on loan to its wearer, and the condition of that loan is one of the mechanisms through which social control is exerted (10). Thus, through incentive and punishment social beings are tethered to the framework that constrains social interactions. In such a framework there is little room for variation from the norm; such variation is accommodated only through outright abdication of social rules. The resulting model of social interactions is highly deterministic and static.

Butler

In contrast to Goffman, Butler focuses on the meanings attributed to words, actions, and interactions, and the processes by which those meanings arise and are later superseded by new meanings. In the essay "Critically Queer" she addresses the shifting meaning of the term "queer" and the performativity of "queering" (224). Butler argues that any term is forever bound to its history, which can constrain and enable its transformation to varying degrees (224). For example the term "nigger" is used as an illustration of a term that has not been able to free itself of its historical meaning. In contrast Butler contends that "queer" has undergone a partial redefinition, while still being shaped by its historical usages.

For Butler the paradox of redefinition and historicity resides in the performative act. The performative act has the potential to redefine itself through repeated use, gathering authority through citation. Yet, citation by definition references historic events, tying the performative act with its prior usage.

> Action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. What this means then, is that a performative "works" to the extent that it draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized. In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (227)

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Thus, the term "queer" as it is used by Participant One in our example draws it's power from the very fact that it has had a derogatory, shaming purpose in history. And, when Participant Two embraces the term, the power of this act lies in the turning away from the historical use of "queer", without denying its history.

Butler argues that history is an ever-present element in discourse (227) and because of this the power to define the subject is never fully in the hands of present-day actors. This makes the use of identity categories, such as "queer", somewhat more problematic than it is commonly presumed by their use in political discourse. Butler calls for the awareness of historically defined meanings of terms such as "queer" within the social movements that use them (228). She further encourages the full examination of the historical use of "queer" for clues as to why it "plays" differently in different segments of the community it aims to represent. In fact, Butler hopes that such an examination will lead to a mobilization of political activism to counteract the divisive nature of the term (229).

Butler directly ties meaning to social action and social change. In this lies the connection of the cultural and the social. In Butler's model, cultural meanings have a tremendous impact on the social world they represent, or fail to fully represent. For example, a subject only comes into being when it is named; the act of naming forms the subject (225-226). Thus the cultural meaning of the name constructs the social reality of the subject, however imperfectly. Moreover, it is precisely in this gap between social reality and cultural representation where change occurs. In our example the term "queer" is redefined because it does not fit the social identity of the subject, Participant Two. Butler points to the politicization of cultural representations, in the form of hyperbolic performances, as a mechanism used by the queer community to affect social change (232-233).

Social and Cultural Change

This brings us to the consideration of social and cultural change as modeled by Goffman and Butler. Goffman does not directly address the possibility of change, either social or cultural, within his framework of social interactions. As already mentioned, Goffman portrays social interactions as being largely determined by the rules that govern them. In this slavish adherence to norm, there are few opportunities for change to occur. In fact everything about the social framework as Goffman describes it aims to conserve the status quo (12, 41). The only apparent mechanism for actions counter to the proscribed social rules is outright subversion of them. Individuals who resort to such actions are characterized as lacking socialization (31), or being anti-social. Yet, this appears to be the only way to challenge the prevailing order and achieve change in Goffman's model. What, then, is the kind of change that can be achieved this way?

Taking Goffman's model as a point of departure, we can consider the potential results of an anti-social act. From Goffman's depiction of the social, an anti-social act can be defined as an act that contravenes rules of social interaction, such as maintenance of face. We can imagine such an act to be akin to the hyperbolic performances that Judith Butler discusses (e.g. "die-ins", excessive lesbian sexuality, cross-dressing). These acts willfully transgress

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social norms with the goal of bringing wider attention to social problems of concern to the gay and lesbian communities, thereby affecting social change.

Cultural change is an equally likely objective for anti-social acts. In fact, one goal of performing excessive lesbian sexuality is to bring about a change in the cultural perception of lesbians as asexual, in essence to change the prevailing cultural understanding of what it means to be a lesbian. We can also return to our original example of a social interaction, to argue that the position taken by Participant Two, which is intended to shift the cultural meaning of the term "queer", transgresses the proscribed positions mapped out for both participants in the interaction. On these grounds it can be considered an anti-social act that strives to achieve cultural change. Recall, however, that the line taken by Participant Two is also consistent with saving face, and is arguably an example of what Goffman calls the aggressive use of face-work (24). As such, the interaction between Participants One and Two would not be considered anti-social, since it falls within the social framework laid out by Goffman. Nevertheless, in the process of saving face, an action essential and internal to Goffman's social interaction framework, Participant Two changes the meaning of the term "queer". With repeated use of the same face-saving measure by multiple participants, the term "queer" may acquire a new meaning resulting in a cultural change. Thus, Goffman's model allows for cultural change to occur as a byproduct of its rules of social interaction, in addition to change that occurs as a result of anti-social acts.

It is important to note that our analysis of change within Goffman's social interaction framework draws heavily on concepts discussed by Butler. For example, the repeated use of a performative act to create a historical record for future citation, thereby allowing new meanings to take root is an important connection between individual actions and wider cultural change. Without such a conceptual connection, Goffman's social interaction framework can only explain processes underlying individual actions.

Butler, on the other hand, is explicitly taking up the issue of cultural and social change. Her notion of a discourse rooted in history presents cultural change as being simultaneously constrained and enabled by the cultural past (224). Thus, cultural change is characterized as an elliptical process that requires constant re-examination of meaning, moving forward yet looking back. Butler argues that social change is closely tied to cultural processes. With the re-evaluation of the term "queer" she points to the potential for a resurgence of political activism and coalition building within the queer community (228-229). Similarly, Butler points to the use of hyperbolic performance, a form of cultural expression, as an important tool for queer activism. Thus, in Butler's model the realm of symbols and meanings, the cultural, is used as a tool for the manipulation of the social realm.

Overall, Butler provides us with useful general mechanisms for how social and cultural change occurs. However, she does not provide us with an account of how this change may be initiated. For instance, how does a new meaning become adopted for the first time, before it has authority through prior use? Why did gay and lesbian people first start calling themselves "queer", when the term only had a homophobic meaning associated with it? Butler contends that it is precisely the historical meaning of the term "queer" that makes its new use compelling. But, this still does not explain how this symbolic leap was made initially? We could suppose such a shift in meaning to

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be accidental. However, the wide acceptance of the new usage points to an internal logic in the process by which this shift came about. What would such a process look like? Perhaps Goffman's individual level explanations can be of use here.

Recall that in our illustrative example just such a shift in meaning takes place on an individual level. Goffman's social interaction model describes the process by which this happens. The shift in meaning of the term "queer" occurs as part of a face-saving strategy. Participant Two is able to side step an insult by reinterpreting it. This is one type of avoidance process used to maintain face described by Goffman (18). Thus, we can hypothesize that the initial reinterpretation of the term "queer" occurred as a means of preserving the dignity of a gay individual within the context of a hostile interaction. Only through subsequent use did the term come to signify pride and rebellion.

Goffman's explanation provides the mechanism for an initial shift in meaning, while Butler provides an analysis of the larger forces at work in such cultural change. The two approaches complement each other. Butler stresses the role that historical meanings play in enabling the transformation of a term; Goffman shows us a mechanism by which a historical meaning prompts the adoption of a new meaning, thereby supporting Butler's claim. The combination of the two approaches may yield insight into a question that Butler poses, why do some pejorative terms get resignified (queer) while others (nigger) do not? (223) Perhaps the answer can be found at the level of the interaction where the term is deployed. One plausible explanation is that face-to-face interactions where the term "nigger" is used are not as common today as those where the term "queer" is used to degrade. Or, perhaps the balance of power between participants where the defining difference is sexual orientation is more equal than the balance of power between participants from different racial categories, thus allowing challenge in the former situation but not the later. Perhaps the gay man who encounters a homophobic attack is buoyed by the gay rights movement and filled with gay pride, in a way that an African American man facing a racist attack is not. Perhaps the question is not of pride, but of anger, or physical safety. Perhaps, as Butler maintains, the answer lies rooted in the very words themselves, one tied to a past too painful to recall and the other still salvageable (223).

In sum, our exploration of the cultural and social realms within the works of Butler and Goffman have lead to the conclusion that these apparently unconnected perspectives gain a lot from being examined side by side. Goffman provides structure in the form of individual level explanations of social behavior, while Butler gives meaning to these interactions through explanations of cultural changes at the societal level. When applied together the two approaches yield a robust framework for analysis of social interactions and cultural change.

References

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