REVIEW SYMPOSIUM

Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience, by ERVING GOFFMAN. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974. 586 pp. $12.50 cloth.

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Goffman has devoted most of his work to undermining the integrity of some accepted social entities (like the individual) and the legitimacy of others (like the total institution). *Frame Analysis* is no exception, except in this book Goffman attempts to undermine everyday reality itself, particularly James' and Schutz' claim that it is the prime reality, more fundamental than other realities (like dreams or play). (One wonders what Goffman will subtly subvert next. Watch out, God!)

Goffman begins by dividing the world into an empirical part—a "strip"—which he defines as "any arbitrary slice or cut from the stream of ongoing activity" (p. 10), and a subjective part—a "frame"—which he defines as the "principles of organization which govern events—at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (p. 10–11). (In his later, concrete applications of frame analysis, however, he is sometimes unclear whether frames organize the individual experience of events, as he claims (p. 13), or whether they determine the actual social organization of the events themselves.) We "frame" "strips" of activity by seeing them as natural ("unguided events") or social ("guided doings")—the two fundamental frames; or as fantasied or faked—two of the many instances of secondary frames Goffman discusses.

Frame analysis seems to have two aspects, which I will call the *cellular* and the *concentric*. The *cellular* aspect of frame analysis involves describing the membrane around an activity—the spatial and temporal brackets of each particular frame. For instance, the theater frame (which Goffman analyzes in greater detail than other frames) usually has a sharp beginning and ending as well as a highly defined spatial location. Cellular frame analysis also involves distinguishing the nucleus of an activity from its surrounding cytoplasm—the inner official events (the play itself) from the outer spectacular occasion (going to the theater). One of Goffman's most incisive conceptual scalpels dissects framed strips of activity into "tracks" or "channels"—a "main" or "story" line at the center of the frame and several subordinate lines "out of frame" (disattended, directional, overlaid, and concealed lines).

The *concentric* (onion skin) aspect of frame analysis involves discriminating the various levels or "laminations" that frame a strip of activity and specifying the ways natural and social frames (basic) are transformed into other, less fundamental frames. One kind of frame transformation Goffman calls "keying," which he defines as "the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (p. 43–44). We key a strip of activity by making it into a movie, novel, radio drama, theatrical play, cartoon, puppet show, etc. A second kind of frame transformation Goffman calls "fabrication," which he defines as "the intentional effort of one or more individuals to manage activity so that a party of one or more others will be induced to have a false belief about what it is that is actually going on" (p. 83). We fabricate "benign" frames by indulging in leg-pulls, practical jokes, psychology experiments, etc.; we fabricate "exploitative" frames by engaging in espionage, con games, frame-ups, etc. Keyed frames, in which all parties are aware of the transformation, differ from fabricated frames, in which some parties are not aware of the transformation.

Since laminated frames are blown up out of fundamental frames ("upkeying"), they are more vulnerable to deflation ("downkeying"). Keyed frames are liable to fall when they are based on ambiguity (someone is not certain which frame to apply), error (someone thought a bank was being robbed but it was only a filming of a bank robbery), or dispute (the police contend someone dies of a heart attack—a natural frame—but the detective contends he was murdered—a social frame). Fabricated frames are liable to fall when the deceived discover that the frame they thought organized their activity naturally

was actually manufactured by the deceivers artificially (someone finds out he was conned out of his money). Since fabricated frames are based on a differential distribution of knowledge, they are more likely to break down and are more discrediting of their sustainers than keyed frames.

A collapsing frame has several consequences. The collapse of the meaning *of* the frame may leave everyone disoriented. The collapse of involvement *in* the frame may leave everyone either uninvolved (like a bored audience at a bad play) or intensely involved with whoever or whatever destroyed the frame and with their own lack of involvement and meaning. The latter, Goffman calls "negative experience—negative in the sense that it takes its character from what it is not. . ." (p. 379). (In Goffman's model, negative experience seems to be to normal experience as role distance is to role: the individual can define both his experience and his self in terms of what they are not.)

Given the often greater intensity of experience when it is negative, some people—particularly entertainers—deliberately manipulate the deflation of frames to create this intense, though negative, experience. Pirandello intentionally disorients his audience by continually collapsing their theater frame (some of his characters discuss their own acting or play at being members of the audience). Many staged sports contests, like televised wrestling or roller derby, intentionally involve their audience by continually collapsing the game frame (some of the contestants violate the rules outside of the referee's purview of control), causing their audience to become attentive less to the ruled actions than to the infractions. Other people—particularly terrorists and counter-terrorists—deliberately manipulate the deflation of frames for the more practical end of political disorientation. Letter bombs (which destroy frame brackets as well as people) undermine the safety of the postal system, treason in high places undermines faith in the government, agent provocateurs (by advocating extreme unlawful activity) undermine the legitimacy of revolutionary groups.

Before finishing with his main concern—the nature of everyday reality—Goffman returns to the topic that has preoccupied him since *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life:* the notion that we are all actors. In fact, Goffman's secondary purpose in writing *Frame Analysis* seems to be to expand on his "dramaturgical perspective" and to answer some of the objections others have made to ambiguities in his earlier work, particularly whether the dramaturgical perspective reveals that people spend most of their lives actually "acting" or whether it merely provides a vocabulary borrowed from theater with which to describe unstaged aspects of life. Goffman now asserts the former with more confidence and in more detail. He shows how much of our talking consists of *dramatizing* events that have happened to us. At these points, at least, talk is similar to theater. In dramatizing these events, we do to ourselves what the playwright does to his characters and the director does to his actors: withhold information to generate suspense, rehearse and replay, and even split ourselves into several parts (e.g., through irony or mocking) to reduce the responsibility of our present selves for what our past selves did or what our future selves would like to do—all this to gain audience appreciation for ourselves and sympathy for our predicaments:

> . . . what the individual spends most of his spoken moments doing is providing evidence for the fairness or unfairness of his current situation and other grounds for sympathy, approval, exoneration, understanding, or amusement. And what his listeners are primarily obliged to do is to show some kind of audience appreciation. They are to be stirred not to take action but to exhibit signs that they have been stirred.
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> For what a speaker does usually is to present for his listeners a version of what happened to him. . . . Even if his purpose is to present the cold facts as he sees them, the means he employs may be intrinsically theatrical, not because he necessarily exaggerates or follows a script, but because he may have to engage in something that is a dramatization—the use of such arts as he possesses to reproduce a scene, to *replay* it. He runs off a tape of a past experience (p. 503–504).

But whereas life is much like the stage, the stage is not much like life. For in their everyday lives people do not speak nearly as well as characters on the stage, and the events they encounter are much more likely to be irrelevant and unconnected and much less likely to be critical and fateful (p. 557).

Goffman's assertion that much of human life consists of dramatizing brings us to the most eerie of his central themes—the disintegration of the individual. Throughout his works, Goffman deepens the sociological enterprise; he is not content with the ordinary sociological excavation of the individual which finds only roles to be social, with the "true" self hidden beneath them. Goffman is much more "radical" than that. He be-

lieves the so-called person behind the mask of a social role to be just as much a sociological construct as the mask itself. Man is sociological almost (as we shall see) to the core, not just to the skin. The person essentially *is* the *ways* he animates a character for himself (p. 547), and the *ways* he separates himself from his role (p. 573). The frame of the situation in which the role is performed governs how the self of the performer is glimpsed:

> Self, then, is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them. Just as the current situation prescribes the official guise behind which we will conceal ourselves, so it provides for where and how we will show through . . . (p. 573–574).

Goffman dissolves the individual into process (while holding constant the social structure and norms of the situation out of which the individual is continually created) in much the same way that Garfinkel dissolves the social structure and norms of the situation into process (while holding constant the individual who continually creates them). Only our cultural ideas about the ongoing biological person give continuity to the individual's intermittent characteristics, each of which he socially generates anew from one situation to the next.

Just as the individual is composed of a number of loosely integrated characters and roles, as well as the ways he shows distance from them, so Goffman—ever the sociological *cubist*—concludes that everyday reality, too, is not of one piece but consists of many loosely integrated frames—traffic systems, ritual systems, bodily manipulatory systems, religious systems, etc. Moreover, much of our ordinary activity is modeled after various ideal realms, found in folk tales, novels, advertisements, myths, bibles, etc.:

> So everyday life . . . often seems to be a laminated adumbration of a pattern or model that is itself a typification of quite uncertain realm status. . . . Life may not be an imitation of art, but ordinary conduct, in a sense, is an imitation of the proprieties, a gesture at the exemplary forms, and the primal realization of these ideals belongs more to make-believe than to reality (p. 562).

Of course we do not see everyday life this way. We see it as unified, and we see a person's everyday behavior as a "direct" indication of his inner state, of the doer's being, and of nothing else. But this unified directness, Goffman affirms, is merely the distinguishing feature of the *frame* of everyday life, not a feature of everyday life itself. In short, everyday life is not the fundamental realm, but only one among many realms, for it is composed of bits and pieces of these other realms—its distinctness being only that, unlike these other realms, we believe that it is fundamental.

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Frame Analysis provides a good vehicle for discussing the thought model underlying almost all of Goffman's work. Goffman has been called many things from symbolic interactionist to Machiavellian dramaturgist. But while his writings do reveal the influence of all these schools, behind them he is, more essentially, a *social constructionist*. He is always trying to point out the social construction of the seemingly natural—the human fabrication of what most people consider prefabricated (the individual, the ritual order, institutions, roles). As a social constructionist, he begins by separating his subject into its basic elements and then shows how these elements are socially transformed (constructed) into something more elaborate. Furthermore, he believes we can understand how most people "naturally" construct a social entity (the ways someone learns the role of a doctor) by looking at how some people deceitfully construct this social entity (the ways someone impersonates a doctor). Thus Goffman often studies how something (like reality) is faked to determine how it is normally fashioned. Assuming that all social units, from roles to realities, are constructed implies that they are essentially arbitrary—a further feature of his work which unsettles many of his readers.

But what upsets them even more is the other side of Goffman's constructionism, for Goffman is also a *social destructionist*. If something is made, it can easily be unmade (whereas it is much harder to denature something natural). After showing how elaborate social entities are built up, Goffman shows how they are vulnerable to breaking down, a painful process. (Our self-claims can be discredited, resulting in our shame; our sense of reality can be deflated, resulting in our disorientation.) Social constructions are not only able to collapse; they are likely to, for small failures have great repercussions. If we can generate a whole self and a whole reality from a few small elements, then our whole self and our whole reality can collapse should its few small supports be destroyed. In Goffmanland, both the individual and the universe are highly unstable: one embarrassing incident, one misinvolvement

can spread rapidly until one's whole self as well as one's whole reality is brought down, not only for the individual to whom it occurs but also for everyone connected with him in his vicinity. This repercussive motif is prevalent throughout Goffman's work. But note that Goffman focuses only on negative repercussions, not on positive ones. For instance, he discusses how spreading embarrassment destroys meaning but omits how spreading charisma generates meaning. In this way he makes the world even more desolate than it actually is, thus expanding his personal pessimism into a universal principle of social life.

Along side Goffman's constructionist subjectivism, there runs a smaller positivist objectivist stream—often concealed in footnotes—which allows him an escape from the implications of the extreme subjectivist position. Goffman reveals his positivist side when he asserts that beyond our socially constructed world there is a real world impinging on it:

> . . . to subordinate all sociological interests to this one—the issue of frame definition—is a bit much. It is a useful methodological device to assume that social inquiry has no concern with what a physical or biological event might be "in itself," but only interest in what the members of society make of it. However, it is also necessary to ask what the event makes society make of it, and how it conditions social life in ways not appreciated as such by participants (p. 196n).

Outside the staged world there is an unstaged world in which "you need to find places for cars to park and coats to be checked" (p. 1). These positivist assumptions also appear in his earlier work on self-presentation where he concludes that human beings must contain something nonsocial to animate their social parts. Thus Goffman seems to have encountered the same problem as Kant and other moderate subjectivists: in Kant's case, where to locate the noumena that produce the sensations our mind turns into phenomena; in Goffman's case, where to locate the bio-psychological substrata of the performer who performs our social characters and where to locate the bio-physical substrata of the world we turn into a social world of meaning. On these metasociological assumptions, whatever creates socially or whatever something social is created out of, cannot itself be social. Whether such nonsocial noumena are necessary on other metasociological assumptions, whether we can conceive of a person or a world even more sociological than Goffman dares to, I cannot say. But Goffman seems to draw back from the brink of pansociologizing everything. He is content to have his cosmos and doubt it too.

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Since the means of self-presentation play so large a role in Goffman's books, it is appropriate to say something about Goffman's own self-presentation. For a writer, self is presented through style. And Goffman's style is certainly unique. He has always written to a different drummer from any other sociologist. In his early work Goffman's singular voice—which implied that behind those dead words a human being actually lived—was especially seductive to graduate students alternately bored and frightened by the insipid, impersonal style of most of their mentors. So they are now greatly saddened by his writing's recent deterioration, much discussed among Goffman watchers in hushed and worried tones. Although Goffman's ideas are as good as ever, stylistic decline has set in on the level of the sentence. *Frame Analysis* (as well as *Relations in Public*) is a virtual thesaurus of stylistic gaffes and gaucheries. If all the unnecessary "as to's," "that's," "so as's," "in regard to's," and other useless words and phrases were removed, the book would be 25% shorter with no loss of substance and much gain in impact. It is not clear why Goffman's style has worsened. Perhaps its decay results from the well-known tendency of the successful middle aged to think their every word worth saying, perhaps from the loss of his previous editor(s?) whose contribution to the appealing compression of his earlier works has been unjustly overlooked. Perhaps he gets paid by the word or (like most sociologists) has come to confuse obscurity with profundity. Whatever the cause, let's hope the editing of Goffman's future work becomes more disciplined.

Not that his style is entirely bad. There are still choice morsels like:

> Interestingly, such ceremonialization of killing is sometimes contrasted to the way in which savages might behave, although I think it would be hard to find a more savage practice than ours—that of bestowing praise upon a man for holding himself to those forms that ensure an orderly, self-contained style to his execution (p. 355n).

> In TV wrestling, the umpire's ruling is not merely flouted, so that he must continuously come close to disqualifying the villian, but the umpire himself may be directly attacked—a monstrous infraction of framing rules—as though a sentence were to disregard its own punctuation marks (p. 417).

Unfortunately they come all too rarely. The book is tedious to read—all 576 pages of the paperback edition. The best way to read Goffman I found is to plow through him slowly, savoring his exquisite examples, underlining the "good parts." Rereading one's underlinings before setting the book aside allows one to appreciate his pearls and to clarify his argument without being distracted by the dross of his overly padded prose. On the conceptual level, however, Goffman is still a master of the systematic and the interesting, whose combination is no easy task. Even on this level he sometimes stresses system at the cost of interest, especially at the beginning, but the ratio improves as the book continues. His most ingenious stylistic technique is his reflexive asides in which he applies frame analysis to the act of writing books in general and his own book in particular, a technique carefully calculated to induce the reader to have the "negative experience" he is discussing.

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For all its problems and prolixity, I recommend this book strongly. No sociologist since Simmel has tied together so wide a range of apparently disconnected events and activities within a single framework—from natural disasters (mine cave-ins) to verbal disasters (puns). He has extended the sociological approach to realms seemingly immune to sociological penetration (hypnosis, possession, insanity, drunkenness, childishness). And he has brought aspects of human existence from the edge of awareness to the center of scientific concern. Most of all, he has dignified our ordinary insights into everyday life so that we need not forget them but can incorporate them into an ongoing scientific corpus, allowing us to integrate our thought and our life, our work and our leisure—allowing us, in the words of Stendhal, "the joy of having one's passion as part of one's profession."

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If someone were to use the term "Goffmanesque" to describe the work of a sociologist, most of us would readily understand what was meant. There would, no doubt, be much fuzziness around the boundaries of this category, and we might well disagree about whether work near the edge was inside or out. Nevertheless, the term is a serviceable member of the sociologist's lexicon, referring to a recognizable genre in the field. Goffman attempts in *Frame Analysis* to codify this genre—or more accurately, to begin the work of codification by delineating part of the basic conceptual framework. The attempt invites assessment of the genre: an identification of the present state of the art and a laying out of the unfinished business.

Judged from the perspective of other kinds of sociology, this genre has certain apparent vulnerabilities. These include the question of its ability to generate testable propositions about its chosen subject matter; the difficulties of transmitting analytic technique from master to novice; and an undeveloped set of methods for implementing its epistemology.

These are serious questions. Some may suspect that they are unanswerable, that they represent fundamental flaws in this way of doing sociology. I argue here that they are fully answerable although in some cases not yet answered in any very satisfactory way. I believe they point to unfinished business rather than fundamental flaws.

Before I address these questions, it is necessary to take a closer look at that part of the unfinished business which Goffman undertakes in *Frame Analysis*. This is a more ambitious book than Goffman's earlier work. Where he was satisfied before to illuminate some strip of social activity by doing his kind of analysis, here he takes a step back to consider the enterprise itself. It is, Goffman concedes, "another go at analyzing fraud, deceit, con games, shows of various kinds, and the like" but here "I am trying to order my thoughts on these topics, trying to construct a general statement."

The general statement consists of a set of related concepts that can be used in analyzing how people organize their experience. The question has deep ontological roots but for its translation into a sociological question, Goffman credits William James. Abandon the bewildering issue of what reality is and substitute the manageable question, "Under what circumstances do we think things are real?" By studying the conditions under which a sense of realness is generated, one can isolate a fundamental but workable problem "having to do with the camera and not what it is the camera takes pictures of."

Goffman, then, is talking about the organization of experience—"something that an individual actor can take into his mind"—and not the organization of society. He disclaims imperialistic designs on his colleagues' territory, granting the existence of a wide array