The Cooley-Elias-Goffman Theory

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Abstract: *This note concerns one of the most popular books in sociology, Erving Goffman's* The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life *(1959). Although widely read, I will argue that it is also widely misunderstood as having no overarching generalisation. A recent article by Michael Dellwing (2016), is entirely favourable, naming Goffman's work that of a 'flaneur', French for 'stroller', 'lounger', or 'saunterer'. Dellwing awards high praise to Goffman: he shows how his strolling can be very useful even though 'uninhibited' governed by a method of having no method. Goffman the stroller is seen to have hit upon many important concerns, if not a single very general one. Most sociologists also see Goffman's work as sauntering, but not appreciatively as Dellwing does. They criticise it as an unorganised jumble of examples. Here, I introduce a different view of Goffman, not that of an uninhibited stroller, but a highly organised theorist, perhaps influenced by another theoretician, C. H. Cooley. Independently, Norbert Elias's historical study of shame seems to support Goffman's theory: Elias found that in the last hundred years or so, shame has increasingly replaced physical punishment, but at the same time, is also being used less and less frequently in written books and articles.*

There is a way in which Goffman was a theoretician in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959; hereafter PSEL), and in his other four studies (1952, 1956, 1961, 1963) during that period. His practice in all five cases was inhibited by a governing theoretical understanding. The first instance to be discussed here may be a bit surprising, because it is almost hidden in the last chapter of PSEL. It is a generalisation which seems to apply to every example in the book:

> There is no interaction in which participants do not take an appreciable chance of being slightly embarrassed or a slight chance of being deeply humiliated (1959: 243).

This statement occurs only at the end of the book, instead of on the first page, where we rightly expect the governing generalisation to be. (A possible reason for the hidden location will be discussed below). It asserts unmistakably that ALL social interaction carries with it the risk of exposure to embarrassment or humiliation.

This is an idea that can be used to further explain what Goffman repeatedly referred to in the book as its central idea: impression management. This phrase avoids the shame word, but in context implies the concern about shame that he finally gets around to voicing in the last chapter. 'The reason we spend such time and care managing our impressions is to avoid embarrassment and humiliation as best we can' (1959: 245.

Cooley and Goffman on Shame

Although he doesn't cite Cooley's (1922) idea directly, what Goffman seems to have done was find many detailed examples of the workings of the 'looking-glass self'. Few of his readers have noticed, but Cooley

(1922: 184) laid the groundwork for the idea that human life is haunted, if not controlled, by shame, summarised as follows:

> [The self] seems to have three principal elements:
>
> [1.] The imagination of our appearance to the other person
>
> [2.] The imagination of his [or her] judgment of that appearance
>
> [3.] [...] Some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification [shame]

In #3, Cooley allowed for both pride and shame, but his examples are only about shame. There are few of them, and they are brief and somewhat abstract, unlike Goffman's huge number of detailed examples of shame or its siblings (embarrassment and humiliation) in PSEL.

In the PSEL and his other early work, Goffman was uninhibited in a way not envisioned by Dellwing: he was not inhibited about ignoring the society-wide prohibition of naming shame openly, unlike most of his colleagues and society as a whole. More than the f-word, the s-word seems widely taboo even today. The taboo shows up in academic research: there are many studies of shame dynamics that use other terms: fear of rejection, disrespect, stigma, honor cultures, revenge, etc. (Scheff and Mateo 2016).

Long before the avoidance of shame became a reasonably widespread subject of scholarly interest, Goffman seems to have understood and directly challenged the shame taboo. Most of his early work focused openly on shame or its two siblings, embarrassment and humiliation. (Embarrassment is a lighter version, humiliation a heavier version of shame). His first article 'On cooling the mark out' (1952) was concerned with humiliation:

> ... The moment of failure (to fulfill a role) often catches a person acting as one who feels that he is an appropriate sort of person for the role in question. Assumption becomes presumption, and failure becomes fraud. To loss of substance is thereby added loss of face. Of the many themes that can occur in the natural history of an involvement, this seems to be the most melancholy. Here it will be quite essential and quite difficult to cool the mark out. I shall be particularly concerned with this second kind of loss, the kind that involves humiliation (1952: 4. emphasis added).

Next, he devoted an entire article to the issue of embarrassment (1956). In what still seems to have been a necessary step toward the systematic study of the world of shame he tried to organise a detailed definition. Finally, in two articles (1961, 1963), he openly defined stigma as a type of shame (Scheff 2014).

Based on Goffman's detailed analysis of shame and its siblings, both before and after PSEL, it seems possible that he knowingly put the central proposition at the end rather than at the beginning in order to give the book a chance at being read. Perhaps he first understood this problem from his experience with his early books and articles: most of the readers may have seemed uneasy about the shame part.

The Taboo on Shame

The psychologist Gershen Kaufman is one of several writers who have argued that shame is taboo in our society:

American society is a shame-based culture, but ...shame remains hidden. Since there is shame about shame, it remains under taboo. ....The taboo on shame is so strict ...that we behave as if shame does not exist (Kaufman 1989; see also Scheff 2014 for a more recent version).

In an extraordinary study, spanning hundreds of years of European history, the sociologist Norbert Elias analysed etiquette and education manuals in five different languages (*The Civilizing Process* 1994 [1939]). First translated from German into English in two parts in 1978 and 1982, it will be referred to henceforth as TCP.) There are two central themes: 1. As physical punishment decreased, shame became increasingly dominant as the main agent of social control. 2. As shame became more prevalent, it also became almost invisible because of taboo.

The following excerpt gives the flavour of Elias's study. It is from a nineteenth-century work (von Raumer 1857) that advises mothers of how to answer the sexual questions their daughters ask:

> [...] Children should be left for as long as possible in the belief that an angel brings babies. [...] ... If girls should later ask how children come into the world, they should be told that the good Lord gives the mother her child [...] "You do not need to know nor could you understand how God gives children." [...] it is the mother's task to occupy her daughters' thoughts so incessantly with the good and beautiful that they are left no time to brood on such matters. ... A mother ... ought only once to say seriously: "It would not be good for you to know such a thing, and you should take care not to listen to anything said about it." A truly well-brought-up girl will from then on feel shame at hearing things of this kind spoken of (1978: 180).

Elias first interprets the repression of sexuality in terms of hidden shame:

> An aura of embarrassment [...] surrounds this sphere of life. Even among adults it is referred to officially only with caution and circumlocutions. And with children, particularly girls, such things are, as far as possible, not referred to at all. Von Raumer gives no reason why one ought not to speak of it with children. He could have said it is desirable to preserve the spiritual purity of girls for as long as possible. But even this reason is only another expression of how far the gradual submergence of these impulses in shame and embarrassment has advanced by this time (1978: 180).

Elias raises a host of significant questions about this excerpt, concerning its motivation and its effects. His analysis goes to discuss what may be a key causal chain in modern civilisation: the denial of shame and the threatened social bonds that both cause and reflect that denial.

> Considered rationally, the problem confronting him [von Raumer] seems unsolved, and what he says appears contradictory. He does not explain how and when the young girl should be made to understand what is happening and will happen to her. The primary concern is the necessity of instilling "modesty" (i.e., feelings of shame, fear, embarrassment, and guilt) or, more precisely, behavior conforming to the social standard. And one feels how infinitely difficult it is for the educator himself to overcome the resistance of the shame and embarrassment which surround this sphere for him (1978: 181).

Elias's study suggests a way of understanding the social transmission of the taboo on shame and the social bond. The adult teacher, von Raumer, in this case, is not only ashamed of sex, he is ashamed of being ashamed. The nineteenth-century reader, in turn, probably reacted in a similar way: being ashamed, and being ashamed of being ashamed, and being ashamed of causing further shame in the daughter. Von Raumer's advice was part of a social system in which attempts at civilised delicacy resulted, and continue to result, in an endless chain reaction of hidden shame.

Elias understood the significance of the denial of shame to mean that shame goes underground, leading to behavior that is outside of awareness:

> Neither rational motives nor practical reasons primarily determine this attitude, but rather the shame (*scham*) of adults themselves, which has become compulsive. It is the social prohibitions and resistances within themselves, their own superego, that makes them keep silent. (1978: 181)

Like many other passages, this one implies not only to a taboo on shame, but the actual mechanisms by which it is transmitted and maintained.

James Gilligan (1997) also provides a helpful approach to this issue based on his experiences with violent men as a prison psychiatrist. For many years, he asked those prisoners who had committed murder: 'Why did you do it?' Most of the answers took the form: 'because he dissed [disrespected] me'. This answer implied to Gilligan that they had used anger and violence to completely avoid the feeling of shame.

Gilligan's idea that *secret* shame is the prime cause of violence may be very important, but needs to be elaborated so that it can be tested. Normal emotions are hardly overwhelming: they are brief and instructive. Fear is a signal of imminent danger, but usually comes and goes in a few seconds. Similarly, normal shame and embarrassment are signals of actual or imagined rejection by other(s). According to Gilligan, shame about shame can result in feeling overwhelmed to the point of losing all inhibition against violence of any kind, including group violence.

Summary

Sociologists might well begin to reassess the theoretical approach in Goffman's early work: not just PSEL but also the other four writings (1952–1963) discussed here. Re-assessment might bring everyone to see all of his work more respectfully, the work of a genius who was considerably ahead of his time. This move might also help bring to light the huge literature of shame hidden behind other names. Perhaps we might reward the foresight of Cooley and Goffman by classifying all the present studies of hidden shame under the title 'The Cooley-Goffman Hypothesis'.

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