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The Body and the Social Construction of Reality in Erving Goffman's Microsociology

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Abstract

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In this article we aim at analysing the important role played by the body in diverse daily interactions as well as tracing the body's status in the social reality, as these appear in E. Goffman's microsociology. The bodily copresence, the mutual perception of the bodies responding to certain constraints in certain situations integrate themselves into a system of signs and signifying symbols specific to different social and cultural codes. For Goffman the body represents the basis of communication, any information transmitted willingly or not by an individual in face-to-face interaction is embodied; at the same time the body acts as the instrument of socialization, since any individual resorts to a series of adjustments which allow him to express his own personality coherently and which grant him the social recognition. This socialization presupposes a wide range of roles, masks, simulacra/simulations which let the actor build and define his own identity in relation to other persons. The originality of Goffman's endeavour also results from his choice of processing data, a method which he himself describes as a display of his own body and personality, thus the sociological analysis turns out to be the adjustment of one's body to that of the others, and to the interactive situation, finally transforming itself into an actual interaction between the observer and the observed.

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1. E. Goffman's (Micro)Sociology – the Body's sociology ?

In his work *La sociologie du corps* (1992), David Le Breton draws the attention upon the tendency in social sciences at the end of 1960s towards the analysis of how the individual relates to his social and cultural environment, and how the researchers focused on the individual distinctive trademark – the body, perceived as a projection surface of the social actor. Following a survey on the history of the body in social sciences, the French researcher identifies in these studies referring to human corporeality three stages which correspond to different ways of approaching this topic: (i) *an implicit sociology of the body*, present in any socio-anthropological survey, which neither places an emphasis on its specificity nor ignores the body's analysis; (ii) the “*en pointillé*” sociology which, although it offers important elements for the analysis of the body, does not indicate any clue for their systematization; (iii) a proper sociology of the body which intersects different disciplines: history, psychology, psychoanalysis, biology, medicine, ethnology, anthropology, etc and which aims at analysing the way in which different social and cultural groups use the body (through posture, gestures, physical activities) to communicate. In Goffman's microsociology, the body plays an important role, but we cannot consider this a proper sociology of the body since the body is not the subject of analysis. Defining face-to-face interaction „as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence” (Goffman, 1956, p. 8), Goffman considers that the body holds an essential role in the social transmission of certain meanings. The individual is not a product of his body, but he himself produces the body qualities in his interaction to others, corporeality being a social construct. (Le Breton, 1992, p. 18).

2. Goffman's *Unconventional* Research Methodology

Although he was often criticized for the techniques he used or for the sources on which he based his research, nobody can ignore E. Goffman's contribution foremost for the creation of a microsociological vision of the social order. Goffman rejected his being labelled or categorized into certain sociological movements and did not want to systematically come up with a theory, but he was rather interested in “elaborating conceptual webs with which to catch the essence of social life” (Williams, 1987, p. 16). Goffman considered himself *an empirical researcher*, a fine observer of everyday life, his first works being real ethnographic studies of some social communities, organizations and situations. The sociologist transforms himself into a *participant observer* preoccupied with the description of the social interaction order. The chosen method, called *participant observation*, is described by Goffman in the first pages of his PhD thesis: “To participate in interaction without causing others to feel embarrassed and ill at ease requires that one exercise, almost unthinkingly, constant tact and care concerning the feelings of others; to exercise this discretion it is necessary to perceive correctly the indications others give of what they are feeling” (Goffman, 1953, p. 6-7). Thus the researcher gives up the classic formal techniques (recordings, questionnaires, photos) and chooses to study the community through an active involvement in its life: “I tried to play an unexceptional and acceptable role in the community life” (Goffman, 1953, p. 2), highlighting his role as participant and not as an observer: “My real aim was to be an observant participant, rather than a participating observer” (Goffman, 1953, p. 2).

Hereby, his research does not suggest *a study of a community* but *a study in a community* (1953: 3). Goffman integrated himself into a rural community discovered on one of the islands from Shetland Archipelago (Goffman, 1953, p. 6), which he aimed to examine by participating in a series of interactive situations having as main purpose the analysis of this community “deeply and intimately, as any ordinary participant would observe them”. Therefore, the researcher’s interpretations are confirmed or gainsaid “by participating in the kinds of furtive communication which occur during an interaction-communication of the kind that ordinarily allows participants to convey secretly and unofficial running comment and judgment on the proceedings in which they are officially involved” (Goffman, 1953: 6). As A. Piette (1998, p. 280) notices, this observation method, necessitating the active participation, is nothing more than a proper interaction, a social encounter in which words are exchanged, gestures and looks are reciprocated between the persons involved in this process of observation. After some years Goffman changed his mind about this topic and redefined *the participant observation*: “By participant observation, I mean a technique ... of getting data ... by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their ... situation” (Goffman, 1989: 125). The fieldwork implies the researcher’s transformation into the subject of his research, the immersion of his body and its conformation to the bodies of other people and to different situations: “you should be able to engage in the same body rhythms, rate of movement, tapping of the feet, that sort of thing, as the people around you. Those are the real tests of penetrating a group” (Goffman, 1989: 129), thus the researcher’s personal experiences accumulated through the direct contact to the observed persons prevail over any intellectual process which intends to explain these interaction phenomena (Piette, 1998: 280). The fieldwork “*tunes your body up* and with your *tuned-up* body and with the ecological right to be close to them (which you’ve obtained by one sneaky means or another), you are in a position to note their gestural, visual, bodily responses to what’s going on around them and you’re empathetic enough-because you’ve been through the same crap they’ve been taking-to sense what it is they’re responding to. To me, that’s the core of observation” (Goffman, 1989: 125). Fieldwork also implies the observer’s acceptance of any point of view and his identification with the observed. Mary F. Rogers remarks: “For Goffman, fieldwork is a thoroughly embodied struggle to grasp other people’s point of view as best one can” (Rogers, 2003: 71). *Participant observation* which involves the access to the meanings of the social world is in fact – as A. Piette suggests (1996: p. 88) – through different body experiences a new way to acquire knowledge.

3. Self, Body, Social Reality

The bodily co-presence represents a natural constraint, a foremost condition imposed by the social life, since the territorial organization of the bodies is a primary need for the social order: “It is a fact of our human condition that, for most of us, our daily life is spent in the immediate presence of others; in other words, that whatever they are, our doings are likely to be, in the narrow sense, socially situated” (Goffman, 1983: 4). Sylvain Pasquier (2008) indicates that Goffman’s choice of analysing the body differentiates him from the contemporary sociological movements: on the one hand, from the symbolic

interactionism which prevents the corporeal from defining the social reality; a social reality which consists of meanings that show up in different circumstances; and on the other hand, Goffman is differentiated from ethnomethodology which preserves in its definition of the social actors only their competences during their social organization of the situation. For Goffman, the social actor is embodied, his relation to the world is in fact an enactment of his body. With his theatrical metaphor from *The Presentation of self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman describes the organization of the social life starting with the way in which the actor builds up his performance, his part, how he embodies the character, thus the enactment of the body is inherent in such presentations: “it is social situations that provide the natural theatre in which all bodily displays are enacted and in which all bodily displays are read” (Goffman, 1983, p. 4). The impression which the individual tries to produce or impose in his interaction to others through *setting, appearance and manner* is also created through the direct use of the body besides the mental effort which comes up naturally as a necessity depending on each social situation. The representation implies *a corporeal form of interaction* and although Goffman does not offer a theory about the expressive body, it seems that expressivity can be found at the body surface, it does not depend on certain body strategies or on the gestures, but it finds its origins in a kind of “Moi-peau expressif” (Marcellini & Miliani, 1999). The body represents the basics of expressivity, it constantly produces information about the Self of the social actor. The Self cannot be reduced to the body itself, but at the same time it cannot have a purely disembodied existence. The Self results from the definition of the situation, it is built collectively according to the produced verbal and corporal signs and it depends on the social validation. During performance the actors have to maintain their face: “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967: 5). The face is, according to Goffman, a social construct, but at the same time “a ritually delicate object”, presenting also a certain degree of sacredness. A whole series of rules of politeness are utilized in order to avoid the ritual desecrations to which the individuals are submitted during interaction: on the one hand, the individuals have to exude self-respect, and on the other hand they have to show respect towards the others. Through *ritual face-work*, the ritual equilibrium of everyday life is also maintained. The risk of losing face represents a constant threat for any individual when the verbal and/or non-verbal behaviour contradicts the willed self-image. For a coherent self-image, the actor has to give the impression that during the performance the character’s body coincides with his own body (Pasquier, 2008). The body of the social actor is a construct which is mainly done through the interaction with the others. Consequently, corporeality is socially constructed (Le Breton, 1992: 18), the corporal manifestations carry virtually different meanings and represent a way through which meanings are transmitted within a community. Hence the importance given to interaction rites, to the construction of a performance in which the body, as a *symbolic structure* (Le Breton, 1992: 31) is enacted for the social transmission of meanings. Society is the supreme authority which imposes the individuals certain rules and rituals, and the Self seems to be a purely social construct lacking psychology: “Universal human nature is not a very human thing”, as Goffman states in *Interaction Ritual* (1967).

In *Relations in Public*, Goffman (1971) suggests that the corporal strategies displayed by actors comply with a series of norms, with certain rituals imposed by different situations, in this case

the body is a tool used to express the social values. The actions are always embodied and the individual's social identity depends on them – an individual that lives in a world which is also embodied. Goffman “does not subordinate the body to the mind or social symbolism but rather demonstrates how bodies are active in the production and conveyance of intersubjective (because intercorporeal) meanings and symbols... he identifies the roots of social life in carnal interchange: face-to-face, body-to-body...” (Crossley, 1995, p. 145).

In *Asylums* (1961) and *Stigma* (1963 b), Goffman focused on the aspects referring to social vulnerability. The stigmatised, deformed, sick bodies cannot be ignored, we no longer face some individuals marked by a *ritualised erasure of their body* (Le Breton, 1992, p. 93) which appears in a regular situation, but we deal with a disorder of interaction as a result of some individuals' impossibility to accede to the sacredness and rituality that define the humanity itself. These stigmatised individuals lose parts of their self, undergo several processes through which their individual self is mortified and they cannot build a healthy self-image, thus their Self is reduced to their own body.

4. Body Idiom

In *Behaviour in Public Places*, Goffman (1963a) re-discusses the important role of the information transmitted through the simple co-presence of social actors. The role of the body is essential because, as Goffman mentions, any transmitted information in these circumstances cannot be but embodied. The body represents the base of any type of communication: “A frown, a spoken word, or a kick is a message that a sender conveys by means of his own current bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that his body is present to sustain this activity” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 14). But at the same time, interpreting the signs produced by the body implies their foreknowledge, they are part of the interactants' common social code. The non-verbal communication which can be done through “bodily appearance and personal acts: dress, bearing, movement and position, sound level, physical gestures such as waving or saluting, facial decorations, and broad emotional expression” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 33) is institutionalized. A great deal of the message is conveyed through body idiom, and Goffman is convinced that “interpersonal attitudes are communicated far more effectively by non-verbal than verbal signals” (Argyle, 1977, p. 65). The symbolic dimension of social reality is emphasised by the way in which the signs produced by the body during interaction are recognised and interpreted: “while no one in a society is likely to be in a position to employ the whole expressive idiom, or even a major part of it, nevertheless everyone will possess some knowledge of the same vocabulary of body symbols. Indeed, the understanding of a common body idiom is one reason for calling an aggregate of individuals a society” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 35). *Body idiom* is consequently a *conventionalized discourse*, but at the same time also a *normative discourse*, as Goffman further explains; the social actor is allowed to transmit only certain information according to the social situation he is confronted with. There are certain *social regulations* (Goffman, 1963a, p. 36) which define the involvement of the actor. The diverse corporal strategies, called by Goffman *involvement shields*, meant to avoid the appearance of “*situational insolence*” (Goffman, 1963a, p. 42), are used by social actors when they transgress the rules, the constraints imposed by situations – behind these shields the actors “can safely do the kind of things that ordinarily result in negative sanctions”

(Goffman, 1963a, p. 39). Nevertheless, the interactants do not have the possibility to fully control their body's movements, therefore, this is one of the major disturbing factors during interaction.

In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) introduces the concept *frame* to explain the way in which the social actors, through these performative frames, organize their own activities. The human body, but mostly the facial expression, being more unstable and unsteady, lead to *out-of-frame activity*: “the human body is one of those things that can disrupt the organization of activity and break the frame, as when an individual appears in clothes that are unbuttoned or unsuitable or a guest slips on a rug or a child knocks over a vase” (Goffman, 1974, p. 347). Goffman analyses these details as being subordinated to the main agency: “participants pursue a line of activity - a story line- across a range of events that are treated as out of frame, subordinated in this particular way to what was come to be defined as the main action” (Goffman, 1974, p. 201), but he does not consider them non-pertinent, consequently they do not belong to what A. Piette (2009) defines as *mode mineur de la réalité*. In Goffman's case, we are dealing with a constant reinterpretation of these series of activities which comply with the process of *reframing* in an attempt to transform everything that disturbs communication into elements of pertinence: “a mechanism will be required for removing failures, and in such a fashion that the removal process itself can be assimilated to the pattern” (Goffman, 1974, p. 204).

5. Conclusion

Being the inventor of a microsociological approach, Goffman aims to analyse face-to-face interactions, and the body imposes itself from the beginning as something fundamental: it is a resource, and most importantly it represents the base for communication, either verbal or non-verbal. Submitted to constant transformations, the body also represents the interface between the individual and the social life, it is *a person's equipment* which helps the individual to build, through coherent expressivity, a socially acknowledged self.

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