

Symbolic Interactionism

- | Early interactionism: influence of G. H. Mead and the Chicago School
- | Herbert Blumer (1900-1987)
 - | Interaction gives social objects meaning
 - | Concept of "joint actions"
 - | Method: empirical and inductive
 - | Important role for individuals

Erving Goffman (1922-1982)



Goffman

- | Cf. Durkheim: interest in norms, social order, threat of breakdown
 - | Look at violations to understand norms
- | Studying the interaction order (microsociology, microanalysis)



Two Goffman Studies

- | *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959)*
- | *Asylums (1961)*
 - | *Deviant behavior results from context*
 - | *Labeling theory*

Key Aspects of Goffman's Approach

- | "radical empiricism"
- | Actions and statuses as products of social interaction
- | Reality itself is socially constructed through interaction

Basic Ideas and Assumptions

- | Behavior is expressive/communicative as well as practical
- | Extension of concept of ritual to everyday interactions
- | Rituals as functionally necessary



Goffman's Central Metaphor

- | Life as theater ("dramaturgical sociology")
- | Why this metaphor?
 - | High generality – encompasses all of social life
 - | Need to define and maintain "the definition of the situation" (cf. actors on stage)
- | "Collective conscience" is maintained concretely through everyday interaction

Key Elements of Theater Metaphor



- | Roles
- | Scenes
- | Front and back regions (onstage and backstage)
- | Definition of the situation
- | Teams (roles are usually collective)
- | NOTE: It's just a metaphor!

Impression Management

- | Defensive practices of performers (loyalty, discipline, circumspection)
- | Protective practices of audience
- | Tact regarding tact

- | "Spoiled identity" and social stigma

Summary: Goffman's Main Insights

- | Reality is constructed through interaction
- | Nature of social life: consensual and cooperative (b/c interaction is risky!)
- | Nature of self: active, strategic, but no authentic self beneath performances ("peg" metaphor)
