Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman: Legitimators of the Sociological Investigation of Human Experience1

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By originating and developing the sociological investigation of human experience, Georg Simmel and Erving Goffman have shifted social phenomena at the edge of awareness to the center of attention, and have legitimated their study for contemporary sociologists. Both Simmel and Goffman describe these subtle social phenomena by distinguishing their perceptual boundaries and crossover elements, pointing out their common features when their statuses differ and reversing their traditional location in means-end and cause-effect chains. But Durkheim's influence on Goffman's basic conceptions of interaction, individual, and society differentiated his interpretation of these social phenomena from Simmel's. Moreover, Simmel's and Goffman's explanations of these social phenomena evolve in different directions, revealing the antithetical goals toward which spiritual transcendental Simmelians and cynical reductive Goffmanians would lead sociology.

KEY WORDS: Simmel; Goffman; sociology; phenomenology; theory.

The most enduring contribution of each founder of sociology has been to legitimate the investigation of one dimension of social life. Thus Marx convinced future sociologists of the value of studying the economic dimension; Durkheim the normative dimension; Weber the historical dimension. The more radical versions of their programs attempt to subordinate all the other dimensions of social life to what they regarded as its dominant dimension.

Georg Simmel has been primarily responsible for motivating sociologists to investigate social life's experiential dimension. Although he and his

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followers have had to fight an uphill battle to maintain the legitimacy of studying the nuances of human experience rather than merely its subordination to something else, they have felt this battle worth fighting because human beings believe their experience is their most essential characteristic: "I experience; therefore I am."

All the classical sociologists, of course, dealt with human experience, but Simmel examined far more of its varieties than the rest. Like Weber, Simmel analyzed historical experiences, such as the blasé reserve unique to modern metropolises (Levine 1971:324-339; Frisby 1984:38). Unlike Weber, Simmel also analyzed many transhistorical experiences, those occurring not only today but yesterday and (probably) tomorrow, such as adventurousness (Wolff 1959:243-258) or sociability (Wolff 1950:40-57).

Simmel derived his conception of experience from Kant. But Kant focused on experience of the natural world, organized by the universal mental categories of the outside observer, whereas Simmel focused on experience of the social world, organized by the local mental categories of the participants themselves. These primary organizations of experience by members of society can be reorganized either by scholarly investigators who employ historical (including contemporary) categories or by scientific investigators who employ transhistorical (sociological) categories (see Oakes 1977; Oakes 1980; Wolff 1959:310-356; Wolff 1950:3-26). Therefore Simmel considered the sociology of human experience to be a second order (sociological) organization of the primary (social) organization of human experience.

In their very different ways George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, and Erving Goffman endorsed Simmel's call for the sociological investigation of human experience. Since Goffman has inspired the current generation of experiential sociologists more than the others, I will compare only his version of this investigation with Simmel's in this article. The book that would compare all four theorists' versions, THE QUALITATIVE SOCIOLOGISTS, awaits an author.

Goffman gave Simmel less credit for founding this field than he deserved. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, he did acknowledge the similarity between his experiential approach and Simmel's: "The justification for this approach (as I take to be the justification for Simmel's also) is that the illustrations together fit into a coherent framework that ties together bits of experience the reader has already had..."(1959:xii). But in his major book on the subject Frame Analysis he attributed the origin of the field to William James and Alfred Schutz (1974:2-5), mentioning Simmel's work only once to illustrate of a minor point (1974:249n). Though uninterested in the difference between transhistorical and historical experiences that preoccupied Simmel, Goffman presented in this book a layered analysis of first and second order experiences similar to Simmel's: from