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Looking Glass Selves: the Cooley/Goffman Conjecture^[1]

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This chapter reviews Cooley's idea of the looking glass self, and Goffman's elaboration. It can be formulated as a conjecture that links two concepts: shared awareness and the social emotions. Cooley assumed that we live in the minds of others, and named pride and shame as the emotions that resulted. Goffman added embarrassment and humiliation. His basic work, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, is dense with these four emotions. Goffman's development of the second concept, shared awareness (the degree of attunement) is also described. The conjunction of shared awareness and emotion in Goffman's work may be the feature that attracts reader's sympathy. Two basic hypotheses are formulated, and techniques that might be used to test or apply them.

Charles Cooley's (1922) idea of the looking glass self (LGS) is an accepted part of modern sociology. He noted the reflexive self-consciousness of our experience, how we continually monitor our self from the point of view of others. He went on to propose that self-monitoring is only the first step of a dynamic social and psychological process:

"A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification (p. 184)."

The idea of the LGS is presented in most introductory textbooks in sociology, and even in some in psychology. However, these presentations discuss only the first two steps. They fail to discuss the third (self-feeling). Cooley is fairly explicit in his examples of self-feeling, even in the initial definition, since he mentions only two: pride or mortification [shame].

In his 19th century manner, Cooley (1922) was quite direct in naming pride and shame. For him these two

emotions both arose from self-monitoring, the process that was at the center of his social psychology. To be sure, in his discussion of what he called the “self-sentiments,” pride and shame are mentioned only as two of other possible emotions. But in his definition of the LGS, he referred exclusively to pride and shame.

In the definition itself he restricts self-feelings to these two, pride and shame (considering “mortification” to be a shame variant). But to make sure we understand this point, he mentions shame three more times in the passage that followed (184-85, emphasis added):

“The comparison with a looking-glass hardly suggests the second element, the imagined judgment, which is quite essential. The thing that moves us to *pride or shame* is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are *ashamed* to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one and so on. We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind. A man will boast to one person of an action—say some sharp transaction in trade—which he would be *ashamed* to own to another.”

Although Cooley is explicit in suggesting that pride and shame are social emotions, he made no attempt to define either emotion. Instead he used the vernacular words as if they were self-explanatory.

But the meanings of vernacular words for emotions are usually quite ambiguous. For example, in current usage in English and other European languages, the word pride used without qualification usually has an inflection of arrogance or hubris (“Pride goeth before the fall.”) In order to refer to the kind of pride implied in Cooley’s analysis, the opposite of shame, one must add a qualifier like justified or genuine. Using undefined emotion words is an invitation to the Tower of Babel.

However ambiguous, Cooley's analysis of self-monitoring does clearly suggest that pride and shame are the basic social emotions. At this point intellectual history takes a somewhat surprising turn. Elaborating on Cooley’s idea of self-monitoring, G.H. Mead and John Dewey based their entire social psychology upon the process of role taking, the ability of humans to continuously monitor themselves from the point of view of others. Yet neither Mead nor Dewey mention what was so obvious to Cooley. Mead and Dewey usually treat role taking, their basic building block of human behavior, as a cognitive process. Neither has anything to say about pride and shame, as if Cooley never existed.

Perhaps Cooley’s formulation of the LGS, when conjoined with Goffman’s embellishments, can be used to broaden Mead’s social psychology, so that it refers not only to cognition and behavior, but also to feeling. Representations of human conduct that omit feeling are only two-dimensional. Cooley’s formulation offers the possibility of showing all three dimensions, hand, mind and heart.

Until recently, there has been little attempt to elaborate Cooley’s idea into a usable hypothesis. Some 65 years after Cooley proposed the LGS, I pointed out that there are two basic components: shared awareness (intersubjectivity, mind-reading or attunement), on the one hand, and the emotions that result, on the other (Scheff 1987). In this article, I propose that these two ideas can be formulated as concepts and that the relation between the two concepts can be used to develop a fundamental conjecture about the basis for human behavior.

In Goffman’s basic work, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (PSEL), no mention is made of the LGS. There are three references to Cooley, but none concern the looking glass. Yet in some ways, Cooley’s idea can be seen to form the basic structure of all of Goffman’s earlier writings, especially PSEL. For this reason, Goffman’s work can be used to further develop Cooley’s idea to the point that it might provide a foundation for sociological social psychology.

Like Cooley, Goffman's elaboration on the theme of the looking glass self (LGS) is also ambiguous, but in an entirely different way. Cooley's prose is simple and unassuming, only slightly removed from ordinary language. But Goffman's, besides being dazzlingly brilliant, is also incredibly involuted and complex. It is dense with meaning, innuendo, impromptu classifications, qualification, and expansion. It is also humorous, ironic, and witty in a way that both entertains and irritates, reveals and conceals. If his work is going to be of use in advancing social science, it needs to be unpacked, sentence by sentence.

Embarrassment and Shared Awareness

Emotions and shared awareness are basic components in all of Goffman's thought, but most obviously in his early work. First let us consider his treatment of emotions. Unlike most social scientists, Goffman explored emotions as well as thoughts and actions. However, there is a difficulty. An immediate sticking point is that most of Goffman's treatment of feeling concerns embarrassment, and less prominently, its two cousins, shame and humiliation. These emotions play an important part in most of his studies, especially the earlier ones, both explicitly, and in much larger scope, by implication. But why only these three emotions? What about other primary emotions, such as love, fear, anger, grief, and so on?

To the average reader, the exclusive focus on these emotions seems arbitrary. An exception is the great English comic writer Allan Bennett, who appears to take Goffman's way with emotions in his stride. He sums it up in this way: "We must love one another or die – of embarrassment (2001, p. 353)." This short sentence packs a lot of information: what Goffman has left out (love) and what he has included (embarrassment). It also wittily alludes to a 60's song by Crosby, Young, Stills and Nash: "we must love one another or die." But Schudson's reaction (1984) is more typical. He devoted an entire article to questioning what he sees as Goffman's exclusive concern with embarrassment.

Explicitly, Goffman gave only one justification. He argued that embarrassment had universal, pancultural importance in social interaction:

Face-to-face interaction in any culture seems to require just those capacities that flustering seems to destroy. Therefore, events which lead to embarrassment and the methods for avoiding and dispelling it may provide a cross-cultural framework of sociological analysis (1956, 266).

Heath (1988 137) further justifies Goffman's focus:

Embarrassment lies at the heart of the social organization of day-to-day conduct. It provides a personal constraint on the behavior of the individual in society and a public response to actions and

activities considered problematic or untoward. Embarrassment and its potential play an important part in sustaining the individual's commitment to social organization, values and convention. It permeates everyday life and our dealings with others. It informs ordinary conduct and bounds the individual's behavior in areas of social life that formal and institutionalized constraints do not reach.

Beyond these considerations, there is another, broader one that is implied in Goffman's ideas, particularly the idea of impression management. Most of his work suggests that every actor is extraordinarily sensitive to the exact amount of deference being received by others. Even a slight difference between what is expected and what is received, whether the difference be too little or too much, can cause embarrassment and other painful emotions.

In an earlier article (Scheff 2000), I followed Goffman's lead by proposing that embarrassment and shame are primarily social emotions, because they usually arise from a threat to the bond, no matter how slight. In my view, attunement, the degree of social connectedness, of accurately taking the viewpoint of the other without judging it, is the key component of social bonds. A discrepancy in the amount of deference conveys judgement, and so is experienced as a threat to the bond. Since even a slight discrepancy in deference can be sensed, embarrassment or the anticipation of embarrassment would be a virtually continuous presence in interaction.

In most of his writing, Goffman's Everyperson is constantly aware of her own standing in the eyes of others, implying almost continuous states of self-conscious emotions: embarrassment, shame, humiliation, and in rare instances, pride, or anticipation of these states. Their sensitivity to the eyes of others, and to the judgments of self they imply make Goffman's actors seem three dimensional, since they embody feeling as well as thought and behavior. Before describing Goffman's treatment of shared awareness, it is first necessary to further explore his treatment of emotions.

The Emotion Lexicon in PSEL

This section explores the density of emotion words in PSEL. As noted above, several readers of PSEL concluded that he dealt extensively with embarrassment, but only this emotion. Some, like Bennett and Heath, didn't mind, but most others, like Schudson, did. In this section I want to further clarify the extent and nature of Goffman's treatment of embarrassment and related emotions, since his usage in this respect is central to my thesis. For this purpose, I will focus, for the most part, on PSEL since I consider it to be his most fundamental statement.

First, as already indicated, in this book he not only dealt extensively with embarrassment, but also with its two relatives, shame and humiliation. To get an idea of the attention he gave to these and other emotions, I made a count of the various emotion words it contains. With 36 occurrences, embarrassment is far and away the most frequent. But the word shame and its derivatives, such as shamed and ashamed, is also frequent, with 22 occurrences. The other member of this family, humiliation, occurs 5 times.

Even the least frequent of these three words, humiliation, occurs more frequently in the text than any other emotion word. Fear, with 4 occurrences, is next, followed by love, with three. The words naming the other major emotions such as pride (3), anger/rage (2) and grief (1), are still less frequent.

How does Goffman's usage of the triad of shame, humiliation, and embarrassment compare with other texts? To answer this question, I counted these words in eleven texts that were easily available in electronic files. I picked texts with topics such as conflict, sexuality, and honor, on the grounds that the discussion of such topics is likely to touch on shame and the other two related emotions.

Of these eleven texts (authors and titles can be found in the Appendix), only one had a higher proportion of shame triad words than PSEL. The volume The Invisible Code: Honor and Sentiment in Post-revolutionary France, 1814-1848 contained 208 shame triad words. In a text with 96, 188 words, the percentage of triad terms is .22. That is, there is an average of 2 of these emotion words in every thousand words of text. In PSEL, with 63 of the triad terms in 89, 716 words of text, the proportion is .07.

All the rest of the 11 texts, however, showed smaller percentages than PSEL, ranging from .01 to .05, with a mean of slightly more than .02. The proportion of triad terms in PSEL is roughly three and a half times greater than the mean of ten of the eleven books compared.

Although I haven't read the text of the book on honor and sentiment in France during the first half of the 1800's, the combination of the topic and era suggest the reason for the high proportion of shame triad words. The topic of honor, especially in 19th century Europe, was little more than a system of regulating pride and shame. Furthermore, during that era, shame terms were used much more openly than in the 20th century. The other ten comparison texts, since they use 20th century discourse, are not as forthcoming.

It is particularly striking that the triad percentage (.03) in Elias's volume on the Germans (1996) is lower than that in the PSEL. One of the main themes of the Elias book is the difficulty that Germans have in managing shame. The idea that the basis for German aggression can be understood in terms of unacknowledged shame is implied or even stated explicitly in many different forms throughout the volume. It would seem that since this book comes late in Elias's career, he was much more cautious about using shame words directly than he was in his first book, The Civilizing Process. In the PSEL, on the other hand, occurring early in his career, Goffman was much bolder in using direct shame words than later on.

Although the word count of the shame triad in PSEL is helpful, it fails to capture the extent of Goffman's treatment of embarrassment and its close relatives. First, Goffman used many words that convey shame or embarrassment without naming them explicitly. Many of his quotes are of this nature. For example, "his pride is deeply wounded" (p. 50) conveys shame indirectly. Another instance occurs in his discussion of the difficulty faced by the person in the role of the go-between:

When a go-between operates in the actual presence of the two teams of which he is a member, we obtain a

wonderful display, not unlike a man desperately trying to play tennis with himself... As an individual, the go-between's activity is bizarre, untenable, and undignified, vacillating as it does from one set of appearances and loyalties to another (p. 149, emphasis added).

The idea that the activity of a go-between caught between conflicting audiences is “bizarre, untenable, and undignified” is an indirect referral to embarrassment, especially the use of the word undignified. The idea of dignity and its lack, almost always a cognate or pride and shame, occurs very frequently in PSEL. Goffman’s references to dignity or its derivatives (17 times) always imply pride or much more frequently, shame.

Another obvious instance occurs in a quote from Simmel:

An ideal sphere lies around every human being. Although differing in size in various directions and differing according to the person with whom one entertains relations, this sphere cannot be penetrated, unless the personality value of the individual is thereby destroyed. A sphere of this sort is placed around man by his "honor." Language very poignantly designates an insult to one's honor as "coming too close": the radius of this sphere marks, as it were, the distance whose trespassing by another person insults one's honor (p. 69).

The idea of honor, especially insulting it or having it destroyed, might as well be expressed in pride and shame language.

Many passages indicate embarrassment or shame without using either word explicitly. Here is an instance that involves both direct and indirect referral:

Knowing that his audiences are capable of forming bad impressions of him, the individual may come to feel ashamed of a well-intentioned honest act merely because the context of its performance provides false impressions that are bad. Feeling this unwarranted shame, he may feel that his feelings can be seen; feeling that he is thus seen, he may feel that his appearance confirms these false conclusions concerning him. He may then add to the precariousness of his position by engaging in just those defensive maneuvers that he would employ were he really guilty. In this way it is possible for all of us to become fleetingly for ourselves the worst person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be. (p. 236)

In these 4 sentences, there are two direct referrals to shame (ashamed and shame), and two that are indirect. Following the logic of the LGS, the clause “he may feel that his appearance confirms these false conclusions concerning him” implies at least the possibility of shame or embarrassment. The final sentence in this passage goes much further: “In this way it is possible for all of us to become fleetingly for ourselves the worst person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be.”

This last haunting line implies a shame state, brief though it may be, that is extremely intense. More than any other passage in Goffman, perhaps, this one also takes us on a dynamic ride through all three steps of the LGS: the imagination of the others' view of self, the imagined judgment of the other of self, and, with powerful impact, the actual, not imagined feeling about self that is the result.

In addition to finding many instances in which embarrassment or shame is implied but not stated directly, another unexpected result of my count of emotion words in PSEL is the large number of direct references to shame and humiliation. Together the count of these two words (27) is almost as great as that for embarrassment (36).

The response of readers like Schudson, Heath, and Bennett has led us to expect that Goffman's focus was overwhelmingly only on a single emotion, embarrassment. Indeed, Goffman himself contributed to this expectation, since his one essay on emotion concerned embarrassment (1956). In this article, and in the later reprinting of it (1967), Goffman provides no link to shame or humiliation. Indeed, he makes no reference to either emotion. The word ashamed occurs once, in a quote from another author. Furthermore, his study of stigma (1963), whose central topic is shame, uses that word only twice, and only in passing.

How are we to understand the single-minded focus on embarrassment by Goffman in all but one of his works, and by readers even of that work? Attempting to answer this question requires reference to cultural influences on emotion discourse in Western society. In an earlier article, I have proposed that there is a taboo on shame in modern industrial societies (Scheff 2003). One indication of the existence of taboo is that studies of shame in social science by Cooley, Freud, Elias, Lynd, Lewis, and Tomkins, like Goffman's, have been largely ignored. The taboo on shame in English still holds: current usage, for the most part, assigns a singular meaning that is intense and narrow. This meaning offends, on the one hand, and, on the other, misses the everyday function of shame.

The aspect of the taboo that is most relevant to the argument here is that unlike traditional societies, Western culture makes a firm distinction between shame and humiliation, on the one hand, and embarrassment, on the other. Usage in traditional societies makes no such distinction. In Spanish, for example, the work verguenza can be used to mean both shame and embarrassment. The languages of traditional societies, such as Arabic, similarly make no distinction. In Western culture, since embarrassment is usually a less intense form of shame, it is relatively free of taboo. Embarrassment is speakable, shame is unspeakable, in ordinary conversation.

This idea might explain why the readers of PSEL responded as if it dealt only with embarrassment, and also why Goffman himself emphasized it rather than shame and humiliation in his later work. My hypothesis is that like other scholars of shame, noticing that readers ignored it, he came to ignore it himself. With one exception, the other shame scholars mentioned above followed the same trajectory, especially Freud, Elias, Lynd, and Tomkins.

The exception was the psychologist/psychoanalyst Helen Lewis. Her principal empirical study, an analysis of shame and guilt in psychotherapy transcripts (1971), was published early in her career, and she continued shame studies for the rest of her life. She told me (correspondence, 1991) however, she had noted that although many people praised her book, no one seemed to have read it. If my argument is correct, she might have gotten many more readers if had she used the phrase “Embarrassment and Guilt” rather than “Shame and Guilt” in the title. Like Lewis and the other scholars of shame named above, Goffman appeared to consider shame and its close relatives like embarrassment the master emotion of everyday life.

Mindreading (Shared Awareness or Intersubjectivity)

The focus on embarrassment as a response to the views that others have of self also implies the second component of Goffman’s analysis, intersubjectivity. His work suggests that we spend much of our life living in the minds of others. In this respect, he follows in the footsteps of Cooley (1922), G.H. Mead (1936), and Blumer (1986). What might be called mutual mindreading was central to their perspectives. Mead called it “taking the role of the other.” This idea is also counter to Western culture, which focuses on individuals, as if they were complete in themselves.

Mead’s description of taking the role of the other initially gives the impression that he is referring to role behavior. Indeed, he sometimes uses the phrase in that way: in order to coordinate one’s actions with another, say in dancing a tango, one needs to learn not only one’s own role, but also the role enactment of one’s partner.

But in reading further, it becomes clear that Mead is referring not only to behavior, but also, more frequently, the perspective and thoughts of others as well. The concept of “taking the role of the generalized other” clearly means that one takes on the perspective of an imagined person or group of persons, even a fictitious group. Similarly, his definition of a social institution involves each participant knowing not only her own perspective, attitudes, and actions, but also those of the other participants. He gives the example of the institution of private property. To steal a purse effectively, a thief must know the perspectives of the owner, the police, the judge, etc. Mead’s theory of role-taking clearly involves the concept of intersubjectivity, the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals.

Cooley’s idea of social life was also built around intersubjectivity. But he carried the implications of the idea further than Mead. Cooley argued that intersubjectivity is so much a part of the humanness of human nature that most of us take it completely for granted, to the point of invisibility:

As is the case with other feelings, we do not think much of it [that is, of social self-feeling] so long as it is moderately and regularly gratified. Many people of balanced mind and congenial activity scarcely know that they care what others think of them, and will deny, perhaps with indignation, that such care is an important factor in what they are and do. But this is illusion. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men [sic] show coldness or contempt instead of the kindness and deference that he is used to, he

will perceive from the shock, the fear, the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we daily walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up (Cooley 1922, 208)

This idea is profoundly significant if we are attempting to understand Goffman's work. Intersubjectivity is so built into our cultural make-up that it will usually be virtually invisible. It follows from it that we should expect that not only laypersons but even most social scientists will avoid explicit consideration of intersubjectivity.

Although human communication is built upon intersubjective accord, it is learned so early in infancy it goes unmarked in most discourse. Occasionally it will be referred to, but only casually and in passing. For example, one might say to a friend, "We both know that....". The idea occurs more elaborately in the popular song (from the 30's?) whose lyric was something like:

I know that you know that I know that you know....[that we're in love?] (I recall this song from my childhood, but so far have been unable to locate it .)

The reference in the song to the cascading levels of reciprocating mindreading is only jokey. But the same idea of knowing that the other knows, etc. was the basis for one of my early articles (Scheff 1967) on a sociological model of consensus. I proposed that the concept of consensus implies these cascades, but they are seldom acknowledged, and have never been explored. Probably by coincidence, Goffman's Strategic Interaction (1969) took up this very issue. I don't think I was aware of his forthcoming book at the time I wrote the article.^[2] To the extent that persons accurately assess each other at all the levels of cascade, then they arrive at a sharing of experience so deep that one can well say that they become as one.

An example of scholars taking mindreading in humans for granted occurs in a recent treatise (O'Connell 1998). The author reviews a fairly large body of experiments that show that small children, animals such as primates, and autistic persons are very poor at reading the minds of others.^[3] But neither O'Connell, nor any of the studies she reviews acknowledge a clear implication of the findings: children, primates and the autistic are poor at mindreading, but normal human adults are good at it. No studies are reported which test the accuracy of normal adult intersubjectivity. Even studies of mindreading seem to take for granted Cooley's idea that human adults spend much of their life living in the minds of others.

A flagrant instance involves one of the central doctrines in postmodern theory, Derrida's proposition that the meaning of all texts is fundamentally undecideable. At the most atomic level, this proposition is true, since all commonly used words, in all languages, have more than one meaning. Multiple meanings lead to inescapable ambiguity in the meaning of individual words, whether spoken or written.

But the leap to the idea of universal undecideability is erroneous. The meaning of individual words is undecideable only if the context is shorn away. Consensual meanings are arrived at by referring to the context in which words occur, both the local context, and the extended context (Scheff 1990). To be sure, interpretation in context is a complex process, fraught with the risk of error. For this reason, there is considerable misunderstanding in communication, even when messages or texts are skillfully constructed.

But, by the same token, there is also considerable consensual understanding about the meaning of messages and texts, even complex ones. Else the social order would immediately collapse. The idea of undecideability seems to be based on a mechanical model of the communication of meaning, as if it were determined by rote responses to individual words. In particular, undecideability ignores the possibility that communication involves at its very core the process of taking the role of the other, of understanding the meaning of messages or texts not only from the receiver's point of view, but also from the sender's.

Another example is what is called the Problem of Other Minds in the discipline of philosophy. Like much of postmodern theory, it is built entirely upon abstract reasoning rather than on systematic observations. Given this approach, it is not surprising that the contributors to this field have decided that no one can ever really know the mind of another person. This belief reflects the Western insistence on individualism, that each of us is essentially alone. But it seems bizarre in Eastern cultures, with their insistence on the group over the individual. In these settings, each mind is thought to be a fragment of one supermind, the Great Cloud of Unknowing. The concept of intersubjectivity offers a middle ground, in that one can evaluate the accuracy of mindreading, without automatically assuming or rejecting the idea.

A final, and arguable example is the work of Cooley, Mead, and Blumer themselves. Although role-taking is central to their visions of human nature, they deal with the concept only in the abstract. Goffman's treatment of intersubjectivity, (and its correlate, the pervasiveness of embarrassment or anticipations of embarrassment), begins to fill in the interstellar void between the abstraction and its omnipresent everyday meaning in human conduct.

Goffman's treatment fleshes out the idea of role-taking itself, and just as importantly, its close kinship with embarrassment, in a way that Mead and Blumer never did. To be sure, Cooley clearly states the kinship to embarrassment/shame in his discussion of the looking glass self, but he doesn't give the kinds of concrete examples that would allow one to see implications. Goffman uses many, many examples that bring the ideas to life in living color. In this sense, the earlier writers found a vast, unknown continent, the emotional/relational world, but didn't get off their ships. Goffman not only disembarked but explored parts of the interior.

Even Simmel, who was aware of intersubjectivity and of shame, didn't link them, and gave few concrete examples. Goffman stands alone. In my opinion, it was he, and not any of his antecedents, who discovered the emotional/relational world. We all swim in this world all day, every day, but Goffman was the first to notice and describe it. For this service to humankind, we should award the supreme medal of honor to his memory.

Unlike most analysts of interior life, Goffman was not content to leave his basic concepts undefined. Although he casually uses the term “mystic union” several times to refer to speakers who are talking to each other, he also offers a fairly elaborate and complex definition of “being in a state of talk.” Since his definition requires an entire page of text, I will not repeat it all here. Suffice it to know that it contains phrases that imply mutual mindreading: “...An understanding will prevail [among the speakers] as to how long and how frequently each speaker is to hold the floor...” (1967, 35; a similar formulation occurs earlier, on p. 34). The definition comes closest to explicitly describing intersubjective accord in this line:

“...A single focus of thought and attention, and a single flow of talk, tends to be maintained and to be legitimated as officially representative of the encounter (Goffman 1967, 34, emphasis added).”

The significance of the phrase “a single focus of thought and attention” becomes more apparent if it is compared to a similar phrase, “joint attention” used by the psychologist Bruner (1983), when he is explaining how an infant learns to become attuned^[4] with its caretaker. The mother, he says, is only trying to teach a new word. She places an object (such as a doll) in her own and the baby’s line of gaze, shakes it to make sure of the baby’s attention, saying “See the pretty DOLLY.” In this situation, the baby is likely to learn not only the meaning of a word, but also, since both parties are looking at the same object, how to have, jointly with the mother “a single focus of thought and attention”, to use Goffman’s phrase. A conceptual definition of intersubjectivity is as far as Goffman goes in attempting to explicate this idea.

But with the other interior strand of Goffman’s work, embarrassment, he was not content to give only a conceptual definition, but also offered elements of an operational definition:

An individual may recognize extreme embarrassment in others and even in himself by the objective signs of emotional disturbance: blushing, fumbling, stuttering, an unusually low- or high-pitched voice, quavering speech or breaking of the voice, sweating, blanching, blinking, tremor of the hand, hesitating or vacillating movement, absentmindedness, and malapropisms. As Mark Baldwin remarked about shyness, there may be "a lowering of the eyes, bowing of the head, putting of hands behind the back, nervous fingering of the clothing or twisting of the fingers together, and stammering, with some incoherence of idea as expressed in speech." There are also symptoms of a subjective kind: constriction of the diaphragm, a feeling of wobbliness, consciousness of strained and unnatural gestures, a dazed sensation, dryness of the mouth, and tenseness of the muscles. In cases of mild discomfiture, these visible and invisible flusterings occur but in less perceptible form (Goffman 1967, emphasis added).

This definition links an interior emotion with surface observables. With his usual uncanny instinct, in the last sentence he even seems to hint at the need for further elaboration of the operational definition: “these visible and invisible flusterings [that accompany embarrassment], but in less perceptible form.” This clause seems to point toward the development of more elaborate coding systems for the verbal and gestural indicators of

shame and embarrassment, such as the one by Retzinger (1991; 1995).

Goffman's attempt at defining embarrassment is even more extraordinary in the context of contemporary social science. The few social science theorists who emphasize emotions seldom define them, even conceptually[5]. An example would be Elias's masterwork, The Civilizing Process (1939). His proposition that the threshold for shame is advanced in the civilizing process is the central thread of the entire work. In a later work of Elias's, The Germans (1996), shame is again frequently evoked, though not explicitly as in the earlier study.

Yet Elias offered no definition of shame in either book, seeming to assume that the reader would understand the concept of shame in the same way that he did. The absence of any definition of shame and a systematic way of identifying it is particularly glaring in The Civilizing Process. This study entails an extensive analysis of shame in many excerpts from advice and etiquette manuals in five languages over six centuries. The analysis of the excerpts is completely intuitive, and in most cases, highly inferential. That is, the word shame is sometimes used in the excerpts that he selected, but much more frequently it is not.

Elias relied on intuitive and unexplicated interpretations of what Retzinger would call cue words, in context. Even if his interpretations were fairly accurate, which they might be, he still gave little direction to future research on the subject. Unlike Elias and most other analysts of emotion, Goffman took at least the initial step toward overcoming this problem. By explicitly defining his concepts, he attempted to link interior variables with observable indicators. Perhaps the secret for success in social science is not only to study both surface and interior, but to also provide links that connect them.

The Effect on Goffman's Approach on Readers

Many authors have noted the intense effects of Goffman's writings on his readers. Reading Goffman, as Lemert (1997), put it,

...made something happen... a shudder of recognition...The experience Goffman effects is that of colonizing a new social place into which the reader enters from which to exit never quite the same. To have once, even if only once, seen the social world from within such a place is never after to see it otherwise, ever after to read the world anew. In thus seeing differently, we are other than we were...
(p. xiii-viii)

This is a strong claim: our vision of the world, and even of ourselves, is transformed by reading.

In a perceptive review of Goffman's work, Bennett (1994) made a similar, if less expansive, comment: "...no other writer in this field [sociology] so regularly startles one into self-recognition."

Lofland's (1980, 47) remarks hint at reasons for this effect:

I suspect I am not alone in knowing people who have been deeply moved upon reading Stigma (1963) and other of his works. These people recognized themselves and others and saw that Goffman was articulating some of the most fundamental and painful of human social experiences. He showed them suddenly that they were not alone, that someone else understood what they know and felt. He knew and expressed it beautifully, producing in them joy over pain understood and appreciated, an inextricable mixture of happiness and sadness, expressed in tears.

Although Lofland doesn't name specific emotions, his reference to "the most fundamental and painful of human social experiences" might apply to, among other things, embarrassment, shame, and humiliation. Goffman's focus on embarrassment could be a central cause of the empathic identification described by Lofland, particularly since most social science writing do not involve any emotions. Lofland's reference of "the most fundamental...human experiences" might also refer, by the by, to Goffman's frequent evocation of intersubjective understanding.

Conclusion

This article has inferred two basic propositions about self and society from an analysis of the work of Cooley and Goffman. These propositions link two concepts: intersubjective attunement on the one hand, and shame and its close relatives, on the other. 1. To the extent that two parties are intersubjectively attuned, both parties will be in a state of authentic pride. 2. To the extent that they are not attuned, one or both will be in a state of embarrassment, shame or humiliation. Since these statements are only conjectures, they need to be reformulated in a way that could lead to empirical test.

There is by now a large literature on the systematic identification of shame and embarrassment in discourse (see, for example, Tangney and Dearing 2002; Retzinger 1995). This literature may be particularly helpful, because it provides techniques for identifying shame and related emotions moment by moment in recorded discourse. One immediate problem is that there is no comparable literature on pride. To test both hypotheses, measures of both pride and shame would be needed.

The identification of levels of attunement is more problematic, because most of it concerns static, rather than moment by moment situations. There is a large literature on what is called Interpersonal Perception. For a review of this literature, see the special issue of the Journal of Personality edited by Funder and West (1993). Perhaps the procedures used to measure "empathic accuracy" (Ickes 1993, pp. 587-610) could be modified

for moment by moment use.

A more dynamic method would involve measuring what Elias (2001) called the “I-We balance” in recorded dialogue. This technique involves counting pronouns, I, you and we. Presumably, a balance between I and you, on the one hand, and we, on the other, would be associated with attunement. Carrere et al. (2000) and associates have used this technique to measure the sense of “we-ness” in the discourse of couples. This method is not moment by moment, since one needs to count pronouns in at least several sentences to get a reliable sense of the state of the bond. Even so, it might be a first step toward applying the Cooley/Goffman to actual instances of social interaction.

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Appendix

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21s M14 2003 7381

[1] Some sections of this paper are based in part on two earlier ones: Shame and the Social Bond (2000), and Goffman on Surface and Interior (unpublished ms.).

[2] When I presented the idea of cascading levels of intersubjectivity in a seminar organized by R.D. Laing, he was so interested that he wrote a book about it (Laing, et al 1966).

[3] Mead was stingy with examples, but he commented on the usual inability of animals to read minds. He noted that an adult human interprets the meaning of pointing by putting herself into the position of the pointer, seeing the direction implied by the pointed finger. But a dog, he said, is likely only to sniff the pointed finger. This example turns out to be erroneous, since sheepdogs, at least, can be trained to respond to pointing.

[4] Attunement is Stern's (1977) term for intersubjective accord.

[5] However, in her extensive treatment of shame, Lynd (1968) also took a step toward explicit definition. In a rare miss, Goffman did not reference Lynd's work.