

## Defining Two Types of Alienation

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Degree of alienation is one of two main dimensions of social structure, the other being stratification. The social class dimension is well defined, at least operationally, in terms of the distribution of wealth and power.

Alienation and solidarity, on the other hand, is still poorly defined, both conceptually (Schacht, 1970; 1994) and operationally (Seeman 1975). A recent article (Scheff 2011) may help, but it is still too early to tell. Part of the treatment, however is straightforward: there is often confusion in the basic idea of alienation.

In his study of suicide, Durkheim proposed that it was caused by two opposite kinds of alienation, altruism/fatalism (too close to the group) and anomie/egoism (too far). Norbert Elias (1994) used different language to make the same point: he called too close dependence and too far independence. He went on to imply a definition of solidarity as a middle distance between self and group, interdependence. He also referred to interdependence as “I-We balance.”

Similar ideas have been explored by social psychologists, who call “too far” isolation, and “too close” engulfment. Engulfment is treated as alienation from self in order to closely conform to the group. An example would be that for many years, wives were often expected to renounce vital parts of self, such as anger and intelligence, to be loyal to their husbands. Runaway nationalism always involves engulfment.

It seems to me that in many discussions of social structure, the second type of alienation, engulfment, is often confused with solidarity. This practice is still widespread, particularly in anthropology. Typically, descriptions of traditional societies seem to imply that engulfment is a type of solidarity, rather than alienation. Similarly, blind nationalism is sometimes treated as solidarity rather than engulfment.

### Alienation in Disciplines

To illustrate the usefulness of the two opposite types of alienation, consider the social structure of academic disciplines. Although the majority of the members of each discipline are probably somewhat engulfed, there are also some who are isolated. Erving Goffman, for example, was trained as a sociologist, and was considered to be one not only by himself but also by others, since he was elected President of the ASA as the time of his death.

Along with Norbert Elias and Harvey Sachs, Goffman was one of the few obvious geniuses in the recent history of sociology. Yet there is no organized group of followers of his work, as there are for Elias and Sachs. One of the reasons, perhaps, might be due to the isolated nature of his relationship to sociology.

His written work virtually never referenced other sociologists or even other disciplines, a potent sign of isolation. Some of the weaknesses in his work may be traced, as least in part, to this

isolation. For example, although his writing is an eruption of a vast number of lively examples, it is unclear when it comes to theses that unite the examples. In many of his studies, no explicit thesis is offered.

When a thesis is proposed, it may be misleading or confused. One example is the essay “Where the Action Is” (1967, 149-270). At 122 pages, this chapter is almost as long as all the other essays in the volume combined (6 chapters totaling 149 pages). It may be Goffman’s longest essay.

Yet there is a change in thesis in the last quarter of the essay. The first three quarters are mostly about gaming, but the last quarter shifts to masculine competitiveness, what Goffman called “character contests” (p. 249). The gaming material offers no clear propositions; nor can it be easily related to the masculinity treatment. The last quarter is extraordinarily intense with emotion: it is the main thesis, rather than the description of gaming that makes up a large part of the essay: much of men’s behavior can be understood in terms of their competitiveness.

Another example occurs in Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959). The whole first half and the last chapter deal with performances and dramaturgical staging, rituals of theatre. Behavior is scripted by the social situation; motives are not important (Goffman the Structuralist). The first and last acts lull the reader into a fantasy of a pure (non-psychological) sociology.

Yet beginning with chapter 4 on discrepant roles, the argument drifts toward individual motives. By the sixth and most substantial chapter, on “impression management,” Structural Goffman has disappeared. This chapter instead concerns actors’ motives, their harried attempts to stave off, or at least manage embarrassment and related emotions. Without a word of warning, the Social Psychologist has reared his head, shape-shifting. This confusion causes trouble at the crucial core of the social and behavioral sciences.

Perhaps if Goffman had been less isolated from the disciplines, he might have learned some of the more important formalities. He escaped by writing mostly books rather than journal articles. Journals require thesis statements, at least one, sometimes as many as five of various length (title, abstract, introduction, body of the text, and conclusion). If Goffman had followed this convention, his work might have been much more useful than it has been to this point. Even for a highly creative member of a group, a price is paid for the isolated form of alienation.

## Engulfment

On the other hand, members of disciplines who are engulfed learn to clearly state theses, but they have other problems. One would be simply repeating questionable work already published, rather than improving on it. A shocking example is the history of studies using self-esteem scales, some TWENTY THOUSAND (Scheff 2011a). virtually all of these studies have the same finding: self-esteem, as measured by scales, does not predict behavior. These studies continue today, even though they have been proven useless many times over. This kind of mindless behavior is reminiscent of what is called *Obrigkeit* in German, blind obedience. Surely this is an example of the engulfed style of alienation.

These two examples suggest that it may be quite important to separate isolation and engulfment as two opposite types of alienation. Over 35 years ago Seeman (1975) showed that alienation scales were invalid because they were multidimensional: a conceptual definition was needed in order to measure a single dimension at a time. Since alienation is such a central idea in social science, perhaps it is time we try to agree on a clear definition.

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