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Taking Goffman seriously: Developing Strategy-as-Practice

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ABSTRACT

As yet, there has been no systematic exposition of the whole of Goffman's work in its significance for strategy and strategic management. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a more wide-ranging treatment of Goffman's central ideas that goes beyond some of the more widely circulated core notions, such as frontstage/backstage and facework. The paper focuses on 'performance' and hypothesizes that skilled performance at the interactional level will influence outcomes at organizational level. It can be assumed that these performances will influence the broader diffusion of a practice at field level. Thus, the paper develops the theoretical idea – an idea implicit in Goffman – that for a performance to be *performative, in the first instance* it has to be competent, credible and believable. Under these conditions, it can dominate over and drive out less credible interpretations. This can help to understand the progress, or lack thereof, of organizational change.

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“All social reality is precarious . . . All societies are constructions in the face of chaos.” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966: 96)
“‘Organisations’ and ‘positions’ are thing-like in their solidity only because they are continuously and repeatedly enacted in a series of micro-situations. They are solid to the extent that they are taken for granted and thus smoothly re-enacted, minute by minute and day after day; but without this process of continual social definition, they cease to exist.” (Collins, 1980: 190)

“Soon it was time for him to take to the podium. Those watching him pace in the gloom behind the stage, his face contorted and his hands clenched, feared disaster. But as the music signaled his entrance into the spotlight, they witnessed a transformation. Within seconds, the crumpled wreck metamorphosed into a colossus. The actor smoothed over the inevitable imperfections of his speech with a wondrously theatrical presentation.” (Bower, 2016: 143)

1. Introduction

There is increasing recognition that accounting and strategy are two fields of inquiry that should have a more intense debate with each other (Carter & Mueller, 2006; Carter, Clegg, & Kornberger, 2010; Fauré & Rouleau, 2011; Skærbæk & Tryggstad, 2010; Whittington, 2011; Whittle & Mueller, 2010). This *Special Issue* is dedicated to strengthening this debate and this paper is making a contribution by discussing Erving Goffman and the relevance of his work for strategy and, in particular *Strategy-as-Practice* (SAP). In 2007, Whittington (2007: 1577) encouraged us to study “strategy . . . like any other social practice . [such as] . . . marriage. law, journalism or war.” In following up this call, we will be looking into Goffman's oeuvre.

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In spite of a good number of edited books dealing with different aspects of Goffman's work, primarily in the field of sociology (eg [Ditton, 1980a, 1980b](#); [Smith, 2002, 2014](#); [Treviño, 2003](#)), as of now, there is no systematic exposition that would demonstrate the importance of Goffman's work for the field of *strategy* or *strategic management*, notwithstanding the, somewhat perfunctory, treatment Goffman has received in existing SAP contributions (eg [Rasche & Chia, 2009](#); [Samra-Fredericks & Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008](#); [Samra-Fredericks, 2003, 2004, 2005](#); [Whittington, 2006, 2007](#)). Disappointingly, the use of Goffmanian theoretical concepts in management and organization studies would appear to be limited to those of 'face (work)' ([Samra-Fredericks, 2004: 1115](#), [Samra-Fredericks, 2005: 815, 828](#)), 'frontstage/backstage' ([Grey, 1998: 576](#); [Samra-Fredericks, 2004: 1114](#), [Samra-Fredericks, 2005: 815, 828](#)), total institutions ([Clegg, 2006](#); [Clegg, Cunha, & Rego, 2012](#)) and the social self ([Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002](#)). In accounting, again there has been some usage of Goffmanian ideas (eg [Jeacle, 2008, 2012, 2014](#); [Neu, 1991](#); [Pentland & Carlile, 1996](#); [Pentland, 1993](#); [Roberts & Scapens, 1985](#)), but as yet no systematic exposition of the whole of Goffman's work in its significance for accounting and strategy. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a more wide-ranging treatment of Goffman's work that goes beyond some of the more widely circulated core notions.

[Lofland \(1980: 25–26\)](#) showed that Goffman followed a 'strategy of metaphor', where a "model is taken as a prototype, various concepts associated with it are specified and this apparatus is then applied to all manner of additional situations in a relatively systematic fashion." Examples include the 'con game', 'cooling the mark out', 'saving face', 'persons seen as ritually sacred objects', 'the theatre', the 'total institution', 'the career', the 'service relationship', the 'game' ([Lofland, 1980, p.26](#)). For example, after describing the actual process of 'cooling the mark out' in a con game,¹ Goffman then proceeds to apply it metaphorically whereby he views "the handling of failure as something concertedly to be coped with" ([Lofland, 1980, p.27](#)) in all kinds of additional social situations. The frontstage-backstage, theatre metaphor is of course the most famous example for this strategy of transferring words and concepts between settings.²

In contrast to many competing sociological theories, including structural-functionalism, institutional theory, or role theory, [Goffman \(1971/72: 137\)](#) critiques a notion that views social control such that the world is divided "into three distinct parts: in one the crime is committed, in the second the infraction is brought to trial, and in the third [. . .] the punishment is inflicted". According to Goffman, "(t)he scene of the crime, the halls of judgment, and the place of detention are all housed in the same cubicle; furthermore, the complete cycle of crime, apprehension, trial, punishment, and return to society can run its course in two gestures and a glance." (1971/72: 137) Indeed, "whatever cultural and structural pressures determine our lives are often experienced only in and through interaction with others . . ." ([Hepworth, 1980: 97](#)). It is in interaction that we experience norms or structural constraints.

S-A-P is certainly not oblivious to Goffman's insights. Indeed, as [Whittington](#), one of the founding figures of S-A-P, argues "Strategy-as-Practice can problematize the performance issue at a more micro level as well. In a Goffmanesque sense, S-A-P can appreciate the *performance* of strategy praxis as an achievement in itself. At stake here is the competence and credibility of individual practitioners in performing their roles, rather than some notion of organizational performance." ([Whittington, 2007: 1583](#)). For example, if a strategy consultant in her presentation comes over as unconvincing, it is unlikely that this performance will make a positive contribution to organizational performance outcomes. By implication, this approach shines the spotlight onto *strategizing*, which means how is strategy *actually performed*? This takes us into the realm of looking at what is done by *specific people*, in *specific locations*, at *specific points in time*: indeed, 'how is strategy done in the doings?' Thus, "the focus on the noun strategy has shifted toward an interest in the verb strategizing" ([Cummings & Daellenbach, 2009: 234](#)). This means that we should take an interest in the actual *praxis* as *practiced by practitioners*, on the "improvisational struggles of everyday life" ([Whittington, 2011: 185](#)). Indeed, a Goffman-inspired perspective does not deny power or hierarchy, but is providing the "grounds for a processual approach to hierarchies as they shape everyday life." ([Rogers, 1980: 28](#))

Goffman was primarily concerned with a number of core sociological topics ([Branaman, 1997: xlvii-xlviii](#)) including the self and performance; encounters; the manipulative/moral aspects of social life; framing. Concomitantly, it has been widely held that Goffman's "oeuvre lacks self-evident internal coherence. Each of his books is written . . . as if none of the others had been." ([Smith, 2006:5](#)) The basis of this criticism is that there is no clear sense of books cumulatively building upon each other; similarly, there is limited cross-referencing between his books. Indeed, "Goffman never re-uses earlier concepts in later works, manifesting a kind of role-distancing from his own previous work." ([Collins, 1980: 175](#)). Whilst superficially it may indeed appear in this way, it would clearly be hard to deny that *performing in the interaction order* is the theme running throughout his work. The remainder of this paper is therefore organized around this core topic, as applied to strategy: what can we say about *strategy-as-performance-in-the-interaction*? The following Section is about 'Performing Strategy and the Strategizing of Performance'; this is followed by 'Frontstage, Backstage and the Hidden Transcript'; 'Footings'; 'Senior Management Teams'; 'Consultants' Performances'; Strategy (and audit) as machine; The self of the Strategist; The Meeting as

¹ The 'mark' is the victim of the con game, 'cooling out' means, after the con has been performed, talking to and comforting the mark by bystanders who are secret associates of the con(wo)man.

² It is worth noting, that Goffman did *not* treat *Strategic Interaction* as such a transferable, metaphorical concept. He used it only in one book publication ([Goffman, 1969](#)) in order to analyse the "calculative, gamelike aspects" (1969: x) in interaction that is characterized by a high degree of intentionality and where "each party must make a move" (1969: 127). We will not be drawing much on Goffman's *Strategic Interaction* book as our intention in this paper is to draw on his work more widely in order to show the multi-faceted relevance of his most famous concepts for Strategy.

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