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Concepts and Concept Formation: Goffman and Beyondⁱ

Abstract

The social and behavioral sciences need distinctive concepts to escape entrapment in cultural assumptions. Currently there are several sources for concepts, but vernacular words are most frequently used. These words are usually ambiguous and may reaffirm the status quo. This essay proposes that a new approach is implied in Goffman's work. Most of the new terms he invented went undefined. However, he can be seen as struggling in much of his writing to develop two basic components of the "looking-glass self," awareness structures and embarrassment. His method seems to have involved using many vernacular cognates and close examination of detailed examples of each concept. The implication is that it might be possible to ground concepts by 1. Listing and examining links to vernacular and technical cognates, and 2. Closely exploring many concrete examples. A study of one type of awareness structure, collective denial (Zerubavel 2006), can also be used to illustrate the potential of this method.

Keywords

Grounded concepts; Goffman; Research methods; Concrete examples; Cognates; Awareness structures; Embarrassment

Introduction

Human intelligence is easily capable of innovation, but is often trapped in the taken-for-granted worldview of the larger society. A historical example is the assumption that the earth was the center of the universe. In the 16th century, the astronomer Tycho Brahe had many exact sightings of the planet Venus. However, he was unable to plot its orbit, because he assumed, like everyone else, that Venus and the other planets moved around the earth.

After Brahe's death, his assistant Kepler, although a lesser scientist and mathematician than Brahe, showed that Venus traveled in an elliptic orbit, not around the earth, but around the sun. As is typical in such cases, Kepler escaped the entrapping assumption by accident. In his frustration, Kepler had resorted to a series of fantastic models of planetary movement. During his play with one of them, he noticed that he had inadvertently placed the sun, rather than the earth at the center.

With the correct assumption, the solution of the problem was obvious. The discovery that the earth was a globe, rather than flat, was also an accident, resulting from ocean voyages exploring distant places rather than seeking the shape of the

earth. The first step toward Einstein's theory of relativity was a joke he told about a hypothetical situation involving passengers on trains.

With respect to the world of human experience and behavior, modern societies seem to be mostly trapped at the flat earth stage. For example, individualism is an unstated, but nevertheless strongly held assumption in modern societies. Similarly, we usually assume that behavior and cognition are far more important than emotions and social relationships. These assumptions provide what is taken for common sense, the unstated background not only for daily life, but also for much of the social and behavioral sciences.

These disciplines have sought to develop approaches based on distinct concepts, theories and methods independent of conventional common sense. However, the quest has had only limited success. This essay will consider only one aspect of the problem, the development of clear and distinctive concepts.

Sources of Concepts

Basic concepts in the social and behavioral sciences are generated in several different ways. The most common source is vernacular words. Another source is the ethnographic study. The approach of grounded theory by Strauss (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and others attempts to bring system into the use of ethnography.

Somewhat indirectly, surveys and experiments also have also contributed to the development of concepts. The idea of "relative deprivation" resulted from a social survey. The concept of conformity had been in wide use long before the experiments by Asch and others. But the conformity studies not only generated statistics. They also succeeded in fleshing out the concept with concrete images of subject conforming to perceptions of others even when they directly contradicted their own.

The first source of concepts, vernacular words, particularly, poses a problem from a scientific point of view. Vernacular words usually have more than one meaning, making statements that use only these words ambiguous. Is there any way that unambiguous concepts can be developed, as has been done in mathematics? Such concepts could help develop shared knowledge within and between disciplines and between world languages as well.

For example, in English the word proud can express strong approval, a positive appraisal. It can also express intense disapproval, a negative appraisal: "Pride goeth before the fall." This latter meaning is indicative of both an exaggerated regard for self and arrogant disregard for others. In the vernacular mathematics of moral appraisal, x (proud) can be either positive or negative. Vernacular words can mean whatever the speaker wants them to mean, like the Red Queen in Alice in Wonderland.

One way to avoid ambiguity is to attach an adjective. Justified pride, of course, means a positive appraisal, even if it seems a bit stilted. Usually however, one must understand the meaning of vernacular words from the context and nonverbal accompaniments. Vernacular words are loose cannons. The way that their use has impeded research will be discussed below.

Wittgenstein proposed that the reason many problems seem to be unsolvable is that they are expressed in ordinary language. Its ambiguity and bias toward the status quo, as already indicated, are impediments.

How does ordinary language support the status quo? One example is provided by the kind of nationalism that leads to or at least passively accepts unnecessary wars. Since the ambiguity of the word pride was mentioned above, think about the

meaning of “national pride.” The pliability of the word love is represented in the warfare sweepstakes with ideas such as “love of country.” English language vernacular allows one to conflate love, which is honorable, with infatuation, which is merely fatuous. Citizens confuse themselves with this and similar usages. Even studies of the political science of warfare seldom attempt to deconstruct such words.

Perhaps the most direct and effective approach to generating distinctive concepts is ethnographic study. The close study of a group or society quite different than one’s own, particularly, can generate concepts that are independent of both the researcher and the subject culture. The researcher can develop what Arthur Koestler called binocular vision, standing outside of both cultures.

However, there is a strong temptation in ethnography, and in historical research and linguistics as well, to focus on mere description, as discussed by Charmaz (2006, p. 23 and passim). Most of these studies, rather than developing binocular vision, are content only to report the similarities and differences between two cultures, instead of developing general concepts that embrace both.

This tendency can be found even in the grounded theory approach, by far the most direct and sophisticated method of concept development. In one of the earliest studies, Glaser and Strauss (1965) described variations in awareness among hospital patients with terminal illness. In some cases, patient and staff shared awareness that the patient was dying. Often, however, the staff knew but the patient didn’t. This study could have focused on a quite general issue, but it didn’t.

The central idea in the 1965 study, degrees of shared awareness, might be also central to all of the social and behavioral sciences. It is possible that the degree of shared awareness is the basis of social integration, i.e. solidarity/alienation, perhaps the most important component of social structure and process. As will be indicated below, Goffman gave considerable attention to what he sometimes called mutual awareness and other terms. But Glaser and Strauss and those who have further studied awareness contexts passed on this opportunity because they were content to describe different degrees of awareness in more concrete rather than general terms.

What can be learned by comparing Glaser and Strauss’s treatment of awareness contexts with Goffman’s explorations of mutual awareness? It is of interest to note that Glaser and Strauss mistakenly include Goffman with other theorists who fail to consider “either the structural contexts in which types of awareness occur, of the structure of the awareness context itself (Glaser and Strauss 1965, p. 13).

However it is hardly their fault, since by 1965, Goffman had referred to mutual awareness only indirectly, even if in many different ways. A flat-out recognition of the structure of awareness by Goffman had to await his definition of co-presence in terms of levels of mutual awareness in his 1983 publication, to be discussed below. Furthermore, there is no reason why Goffman’s combination of detailed particulars and general ideas cannot be added to the grounded theory approach, as outlined below.

Concepts and Theories

The pliability of central concepts represents a formidable barrier to the social and behavioral disciplines. In order to be understood we need to write in vernacular language. How is one to overcome the problem of ambiguity and conservatism? This essay accepts the need to use vernacular language in designing and reporting a study, but in addition, **the central hypothesis can be organized around two or**

more general concepts. A concept is a word that is defined so clearly that there can be only a single meaning.

General concepts are the fundamental building blocks of theory. Propositions (hypotheses) are made up of at least two such concepts, and a theory, at least two propositions. Formulating an explicit problem and hypothesis requires the use of two or more clearly defined concepts, the more general the concepts, the better.

In this approach, the first step in a study would not be the statement of a problem, the systematic collection of data, reference to a theory, or even a hypothesis. These steps are all too ambitious for beginners. Instead one would attempt to develop two clearly defined concepts, in order to avoid ambiguity and enmeshment in the status quo.

Herbert Blumer (1986) called attention to this problem in two articles that dealt explicitly with the meaning of concepts. He clearly indicated that none of the basic concepts in the social and behavioral sciences are true concepts. Blumer's solution to this problem, however, was different than the one offered here. He suggested that we must merely be aware that our concepts only sensitize us to a problem, since they do not have a single meaning.

The work on grounded theory by Anselm Strauss (1998) and others carried Blumer's idea of sensitizing concepts forward. Strauss and those who followed provide a method of generating concepts from comparative data. But, like Blumer, this method does not insist on single-meaning concepts. Hinting at the direction taken in this essay, Giddens (1984) called for the use of examples to "instantiate" concepts, but without giving sufficient description of what this process might look like.

Goffman's World

Goffman's writing is difficult to understand, even though it is brilliant, original, and entertaining. One flaw is that he usually doesn't state a clear thesis. (As indicated in the first footnote, in this essay I have tried to avoid that flaw by stating the central thesis four times in varying forms.) Either there is no thesis provided at all, or what is offered is misleading. The former, lack of a clear thesis, characterizes his longest and most enigmatic book, Frame Analysis (1974).ⁱⁱ In my interpretation, the unstated purpose of this book is to develop a definition for the concept of context, rather than using the word in its vernacular sense. As it turns out, his representation of context as a "frame assembly" is too recursive (repetitive) to be managed verbally. In mathematical notation, however, if frame is taken to mean bracket, it can be represented by recursive bracketed clauses. Note that frame assembly is yet another terminology that is closely related to the structure of awareness, since both imply bracket assemblies.

The War on Tropes

There is a substantial literature commenting on Goffman's work that has established that it is no help with systematic theory, method or data, at least in any conventional sense. What could he be up to? One clue is provided by Goffman's endless creation of new terms and systems of classification that seem to lead nowhere. Since the reader is never told the purpose of these rat's nests of classifications, and Goffman himself rarely refers to them in his subsequent work, we face a mystery.

It is possible that Goffman's main purpose was preliminary to science, to demolish ruling tropes [metaphors] in order to make room for scientific method.

The neatly worked inner stretches of science are an open space in the tropical jungle, created by clearing tropes away. (Quine, 1978: 160)

Vernacular words are ambiguous because they are metaphorical in origin, they can point in many directions. An example is provided by the idea of mutual knowledge, already mentioned above. The phrase that Clark (1981) uses for mutual knowledge is "common ground." Mutual knowledge refers to a phenomenon of shared inner consciousness, but is stated in terms of an image that refers to the outer, material world. His metaphor merely hints at the inner phenomenon using a physical image. It therefore obscures at least as much as it reveals.

As Quine indicates, if science is to be developed, it is necessary that obstructive metaphors be overthrown. Many vernacular words and phrases, such as common ground, are mere metaphors that do not model what is being referred to. A trope is a particular type of metaphor, a master image that plays a central role in a particular culture.

One example from astronomy has been discussed above, the taken-for-granted assumption that the earth was the center of the universe. The methods of science are useless if one is entrapped in erroneous assumptions. A trope is a ruling metaphor in the assumptive world of a culture. Goffman's hectic and relentless invention of new terms was a step toward clearing an open space for human science in the tropical jungle of our assumptive world.

Most social science theory and research depends on tropes, vernacular words that are metaphors rather than concepts. My paper on alienation/solidarity (Scheff 2006a) suggests that current social science usage assigns many different meanings to these two terms, and proposes a single-meaning concept for each of them.

In our review (2004), David Fearon and I showed that the most studied topic in all of social science, self-esteem, has never been defined conceptually. As a result, all of the some two hundred self-esteem scales confound cognitive, emotional, dispositional, and relational components. The most damaging confound, between thought and feeling, shows up in dictionary definitions.

1.Pride in one's self; self-respect. (American Heritage Dictionary, 2000)

2.Holding a good opinion of one's self; self-complacency. (Webster's Revised Unabridged dictionary.1998)

3. A feeling of pride in yourself [syn: self-pride] 2: the quality of being worthy of esteem or respect [syn: dignity, self-respect, self-regard] (Princeton University Wordline, 1997)

Two of the three definitions (1 and 3) are in terms of the emotion pride. Definitions # 1 and 3 also suggest other synonyms that, if not emotions, are at least mixtures of feelings and thought: respect, regard and esteem. These two definitions stress the affective components of self-esteem. If we assume that shame is the emotion opposite to pride, then two of the three definitions suggest that high self-esteem involves pride, and low self-esteem, shame.

Definition # 2, however, takes a different tack: it mentions no emotions or feelings. Instead, it defines self-esteem cognitively, holding a good opinion of self. Self-esteem scale items are of both kind, but with somewhat more emphasis on

cognitive elements. That is, self-esteem scales and studies contain both the cognitive, the affective and the social. One aspect of the third definition refers to "Being worthy of esteem or respect" which seems to imply a social audience, in addition to being one's own audience.

It seems that the inclusion of many orthogonal components in the scale items has sealed the fate of all research using self-esteem scales. There have been ten substantial reviews of the results of self-esteem studies, beginning with Wells and Marwell (1976), and as late as Baumeister (2003). All ten report the same findings: the correlation between self-esteem scales and behavior is perilously close to zero. To avoid this kind of waste, what kind of work is needed preliminary to systematic testing?

Looking-Glass Self and the Emotional/Relational World

As already indicated, Goffman was involved for most of his career in a struggle to define two ideas: embarrassment/shame and mutual awareness. Although Goffman himself didn't articulate the link between them, it can be represented by way of Cooley's (1922) looking-glass self (LGS). This idea connects two vast realms, the social nature of the self, on the one hand, and an intense emotional life that results, on the other. Cooley proposed first that the self is social, that we 'live in the minds of others without knowing it.' He went on to say that living in the minds of others, imaginatively, gives rise to real emotions, pride and shame. This process is the basis for what Goffman called impression management.

This idea underlies many of the examples that enliven Goffman's work, and make it understandable and entertaining. One manages one's image in the eyes of others in order to come to terms with pride and shame. This idea is not part of Cooley's formulation (1922), which involves 3 steps:

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: [1] the imagination of our appearance to the other person; [2] the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and [3] some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. (shame; p. 184; numbers added for emphasis)

Cooley seems to suggest that we passively accept whatever pride or shame that comes our way. Goffman took the process two steps further: 4. we attempt to manage the impression that we make on others, to gain pride and avoid embarrassment/shame. 5. If we are not able to manage it, then we further attempt to manage the resulting embarrassment. Goffman provided many, many examples to ground these two steps.

Compared to Goffman, Cooley was relatively direct in naming pride and shame (considering mortification to be a shame variant). 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. To make sure we understand this point, he mentions shame three more times (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. (p. 184-185)

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.

As already mentioned, in current usage in English, the word pride used without qualification may have an inflection of arrogance or hubris. 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. And usage of the word shame, especially in English, is even more confusing, as will be indicated below. Using undefined emotion words is an invitation to the Tower of Babel.

However ambiguous, Cooley's analysis of self-monitoring clearly suggest that pride and shame are the basic social emotions. Goffman was the first social scientist to follow up on the idea, fleshing it out with a large number of refreshingly varied examples of everyday behavior.

Goffman's Version of the Looking Glassⁱⁱⁱ

In Goffman's basic work, Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, the LGS is not mentioned explicitly. There are three references to Cooley, but none concern the looking glass. Yet Cooley's idea can be seen to form the basic structure of all of Goffman's earlier writings, especially Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (PSEL), some of the chapters of Interaction Ritual, and several other books.

Like Cooley, Goffman's elaboration on the theme of the looking glass is also ambiguous, but in an entirely different way. Cooley's prose is simple and unassuming, mostly ordinary language. But Goffman's, besides being dazzlingly brilliant, is also incredibly involuted and complex. It is dense with meaning, innuendo, impromptu classifications, qualifications, and expansion. It is also humorous, ironic, and witty in ways that both reveal and conceal. I propose that the thread in Goffman's work that came closest to completion concerns emotions, on the one hand, and awareness structures (especially what he called mutual awareness), on the other.

Goffman on Emotions

Goffman developed the concept of embarrassment in many different ways. First, he used words that imply 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 he cited 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 (Goffman, 1959: 69)

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

Many passages indicate embarrassment or shame without using either word explicitly. Here is a virtuoso instance that involves two direct and two indirect referrals:

Knowing that his audiences are capable of forming bad impressions of him, the individual may come to feel ashamed (1) of a well-intentioned honest act merely because the context of its performance provides false impressions that are bad. Feeling this unwarranted shame (2), 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 (3). 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 (4). (p. 236. Emphasis added)

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 takes us on a jolting roller-coaster 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. For Goffman’s actors, social interaction, if not a vale of embarrassment, is a slippery slope because of the constant anticipation of the possibility of embarrassment or its even more painful variants.

At first sight, one would think that reference to so many different vernacular words and phrases was simply a flaw, pure and simple. But it may be that it was also a strength, in that the inclusion of all these cognates would enable both Goffman and his readers to understand the purview, and indeed, the central meaning of the

concept of embarrassment. The work of Zerubavel (2006) on collective denial seems to illustrate this point (see below).

Embarrassment and Mutual Awareness: Grounding Two Concepts

Although Goffman casually used metaphors for mutual awareness (e.g., the phrase “mystic union.”), he also used many terms and phrases that refer to awareness structures more directly. The least direct one is his 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 to know that it contains phrases that imply mutual awareness: “...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).

A definition that comes closer to explicitly describing intersubjective accord (Goffman, 1967):

...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. (p. 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 with its caretaker.^{iv} 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 more detailed idea of the structure of mutual awareness can be found in Goffman’s (1983) definition of what he called “co-presence.”^v

When in each other’s presence individuals are admirably placed to share a joint focus of attention [1], perceive that they do so [2], and perceive this perceiving [3] (p. 3, numbers added)

This quote points to three levels of mutual awareness: 1. joint attention (agreement), mutual perception of joint attention, and mutual perception of the mutual perception. In his book on strategy (1969) Goffman at least hints that even higher orders of mutual perception might determine the winner of strategic contests, such as spying and large scale financial transactions, if the stakes are high enough.

By implication, Goffman’s model of mutual awareness is recursive: I know that you know that I know, etc. This model, like his model of context, implies a bracket assembly. Such a recursive model might be used to provide a single clear meaning to the otherwise ambiguous concept of solidarity. Degrees of alienation can be then defined in terms of a complex typology that would involve kinds of understanding, misunderstanding, and lack of understanding at each of the levels of mutual perception. Complex though it would be, this idea can provide single-meaning definitions of solidarity and alienation.

Degree of solidarity would involve the levels of mutual awareness. The highest degree of solidarity would be mutual understanding at all levels of awareness that are

accessed by the two parties. Similarly, alienation would concern the absence of understanding at one or more levels that one of the parties accesses. This model leads to the counter-intuitive possibility that lack of mutual awareness at one of the higher levels would be more alienated than understanding or agreement at the first level. This idea will be explored further in reviewing the concept of collective denial, below.

Beginning in the 80's, there began to be an expanding literature on what is called "mutual knowledge" in philosophy and economics (Clark and Marshall 1881; Sperber and Wilson 1986; Clark and Brennan, 1996). These ventures do not mention the earlier explorations of the looking-glass. They also have a boogie man; the possibility that they call infinite regression. The idea of cascades of mutual mind reading, I know that you know that I know..., seems to panic the authors. As Goffman implied, however, the number of recursive levels of mutual awareness is surely an empirical problem, not a conceptual one.

A conceptual definition of mutual awareness is as far as Goffman goes in attempting to explicate this idea; he didn't provide objective indicators. Perhaps Goffman was uncomfortable about flatly stating and following up an idea that is anathema in individualistic modern societies, that at least temporarily, we can all become "members one of another." Although church members sing this phrase, most would be loath to take its meaning literally, as Cooley and Goffman did.

However, the conceptual model of solidarity offered here can generate operational definitions also. There is already a small research literature on "mind-reading" and other minds (Malle and Hodges 2005) that could be expanded into survey research by asking questions not only about beliefs, but beliefs about other's beliefs, etc. There is also a beginning literature on estimating shared awareness by using verbal and gestural cues in moment-to-moment recordings of conversation (Lewis 1971; Retzinger 1991; Scheff 1994)

Goffman's attempt to establish a model of mutual awareness needs further development, however, if it is to be used with respect to more general issue of degrees of social integration (solidarity/alienation continuum). Goffman did only the easy part, solidarity (complete attunement). He didn't continue to the point of exploring different types and degrees of alienation (failures of attunement): 2. partially attuned (only one error by one party), 3. connected/disconnected: one error by both parties), 4. partially alienated: one error by one party, two errors by the other, and 5. complete isolation (two errors by both parties). This model is outlined in "Awareness Structures: Solidarity and alienation as concepts" (Article # 55a, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/scheff/>).

A Concept of Embarrassment?

In the case of the other idea discussed here, embarrassment, Goffman (1967) was not content to give only a conceptual definition, but also followed up, offering 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. (p. 97, emphasis added)

This definition links an interior emotion with surface observables. With his usual uncanny instinct, in the last sentence he even hints 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). Certainly in 1967 and even today, Goffman was ahead of the curve.

Part/Whole Analysis

Perhaps we should imitate Goffman, developing concepts grounded in the details of the reality they are supposed to represent. This issue came up in an interview with the novelist Muriel Spark concerning her novel The Bachelors. The novel describes the lives of bachelors of varying ages and stations in life in London in remarkable detail. Ms. Spark, a middle-aged unmarried woman at the time, was asked how she could possibly know so much about such men. Her answer was "A lifetime of combing lint." By lint, Spark seems to be referring to the detailed particulars of the lives of many people that she had noted. This idea might be as useful in the early stages of science as it seems to be in the writing of novels. As William Blake put it, "... Art and Science cannot exist but in minutely organized particulars." Goffman's way was to take initial steps towards organizing particulars.

In one chapter of Richard Lazarus's last book (1997), he suggests a new approach, at least for him, to the study of emotion. His initial discussion, at least, implies that with respect to emotions, some lint combing might be in order. At the beginning of Chapter 8, he proposes that one might derive a classification of emotions by close study of narratives^{vi} He gives one example, a paragraph describing an actual marital quarrel. From this one narrative, he derives four types of anger: inhibited, righteous and sullen anger, and hostility.

Lazarus's idea of classifying emotions by using narratives seems to be a step forward in this field. Plutchick (2003) has pointed out that although there have been two dozen emotion classifications in English alone, there is next to no agreement among them as to names of the basic emotions or even their number. Perhaps the main reason for this disparity is that each of the classifications is entirely theoretical, with no grounding in actual emotional events, the "thin air" method.

Even though Lazarus has a good idea, he provides only one narrative^{vii} In the rest of the chapter he goes on to derive still another theoretical taxonomy for all the major emotions out of thin air, seemingly forgetting his own suggestion about the use of narratives. He proposes many abstract concepts, but employs only one particular, the narrative about the marital quarrel.

For the development of a concept, how many parts as compared to how many wholes? It doesn't seem likely that there should be more wholes than parts, as in Lazarus's chapter. More likely, there should be many more parts than wholes, as is the case in Goffman's work. Using his approach as an example, it is possible to be

explicit about the steps needed in order to ground concepts in concrete particulars, what I have called here “lint combing.”

A weakness in Goffman’s use of this method is that in some cases he resorts to hypothetical situations. Although they help the argument along, hypotheticals have serious drawbacks in science. The most glaring one is that they always lack the ambient details, the minute, seemingly irrelevant particulars that often provide the key. Another fault is that since hypotheticals are imaginary, the author is locked into his or her own head.

Attempts to apply a new concept to concrete instances generate what may be a powerful ally, one’s human intuition. The discipline of examining the extent to which an abstract concept is appropriate to many concrete examples forces one to see both the concept’s strengths and limitations, if only intuitively. To the extent that the concept stands up in this informal testing, one might then have the confidence to proceed with more formal tests.

The 16-th century scholar-poet-scientist Pascal remarked that one can be a pedestrian poet using only intuition, and a pedestrian scientist using only system. He went on to say that to be a creative poet or scientist, one needs to use both resources. The method outlined here is an attempt to follow Pascal’s suggestion.

Perhaps by adding the development of grounded concepts to the grounded theory approach, one might have the best of both worlds. The close examination of particular instances of some of the awareness contexts in Glaser and Strauss’s study (1965) might have been an incentive to think in terms of the much more general concepts of solidarity and alienation. As Goffman’s work on mutual awareness suggests, the more concrete the observations, the more likely the relevance of general concepts will be recognized.

For brevity, only one example will be used to illustrate how the use of the most general concepts can widen the horizon of empirical studies. Research on awareness contexts in dying could be linked the very large issues of life and death raised by Norbert Elias in his profound discussion of the loneliness of the dying (1984). One might be able to show, for example, the relationship between social networks in the life span and in dying: solidarity relationships in life usually lead to connectedness with others in dying, and alienated relationships in life are linked to lonely deaths.

Collective Denial

At this time there seems to have been only one study that illustrates some of the basic components in the method that has been outlined here. Zerubal (2006), who was Goffman’s student, has provided a book-length analysis the idea of collective denial. His study has two basic components. The first is the discussion of words and phrases (cognates) that are equivalent to, or at least clearly related to, the idea of collective denial: e.g., the elephant in the room, collective silence, casting a blind eye, etc. Since he also uses a technical term himself (intersubjectivity) closely related to the idea of awareness structures, his approach hints at including not only vernacular cognates, but also technical ones.

The other component is his review of a very large array of studies, and in some cases, concrete examples, that involve collective denial. One type of study that he reviews is that of families in which incest has been committed but kept silent for many years. From some of these studies he quotes commentary by family members, giving a sense not only of the general issue (collective denial), but also the particulars of

some of the cases. Similarly, he reviews many studies, mostly concerning Germany, of the collective denial of the Holocaust.

The extended nature of Zerubavel's review of vernacular cognates makes his study somewhat unique. His analysis of ordinary language usage is so exhaustive that it takes up a sizable portion of the text. The recounting of so many words and phrases that refer to collective denial has a lapidary effect; it marshals layer after layer of cognates. It doesn't take long for the reader to realize that there is a whole language for referring to collective silence.

However, for future usage, a more efficient procedure might be to give a full analysis for only the most common cognates, such as the three mentioned above. After that, it might be sufficient to simply provide a list of cognates in the appendix. This is approach that Retzinger used (1995) in her treatment of anger and to shame cognates.

There is a second difference between Retzinger's method and Zerubavel's. Most of Retzinger's book involves analysis of moment-to-moment discourse, so actual instances of the occurrence of emotion cognates occur repeatedly. Her analysis serves to provide informal support for the inclusion of words as cognates on her lists.

Zerubavel's book, however, makes much less use of word-by-word analysis, so most of the empirical instances he provides or cites do not provide support for his naming of cognates. The instances referred to in his book are mostly citations, even though excerpts and in some cases, discourse is provided.

Zerubavel's book follows much more closely to Goffman's usage than Retzinger's does. Goffman didn't directly analyze vernacular cognates, as both Zerubavel and Retzinger do. Nor did he concern himself with comparing technical cognates; in fact he used a wide variety of terms for awareness structures or closely related ideas without noting the links, as mentioned above.

Yet Zerubavel's book is a considerable advance over Goffman. As already noted, Zerubavel tends to use a single term linked to awareness structures, intersubjectivity. He singles out this term because it involves "the very essence of sociality." Further, he cites (p. 82, fn. 13) his own extended discussions of this term in one of his earlier books (Zerubavel 1997). Perhaps the next step would be to compare the technical term that one uses to refer to awareness structures with those that others have used. Goffman also left this step out. He didn't even relate his own terms for various types of awareness structures to each other, much less to those used by other authors.

Perhaps there is one more step needed in Zerubavel's analysis of collective denial, to locate it in the spectrum of types of awareness structures. For brevity, I will illustrate this type of analysis with respect to a single situation, the family that is silent about the child's molest by one of the parents.

There is agreement at the first level regarding the molest: all three persons know it to be a fact. At the second and higher levels, however, there is uncertainty. Each person thinks that at least one of the other two knows, but since all are silent, one or more of the persons may doubt themselves in a fundamental way. If such an outrageous act is not acknowledged, perhaps it didn't really happen. In this way, the awareness structure of collective denial leads not only to alienation in the form of isolation between the three persons, but also the possibility of alienation from self within one or more of the persons, self-estrangement. The giving up of real memories and other vital parts of the self is the core component of what might be called engulfment, characteristic of dysfunctional families, organizations, ethnic groups, and nations.

A somewhat more complex but still alienated structure of awareness would be involved if all three were certain at the first level, as above, but one or two of the three were certain at the second level, knowing that one of the other persons knows. The structure typically occurs in what is called a triangle: two persons allied against a third. Suppose the child privately reveals to the mother that she was molested, and the mother acknowledges that she already knew it. This might decrease the alienation between mother and child. However, if they don't reveal their knowledge to the father, then collective silence would continue, and so alienation within the triangle.

If, however, the two reveal that they know to the father and to others, and both he and they acknowledges the molest, then the three members of group still might not be happy, but they would no longer be alienated with respect to the molest. Having to bear an unbearable secret no longer, the healing of the relationship might begin between mother and daughter, and given appropriate kind of responses by the father and others outside the family, between the mother, the daughter and the father.

Conclusion

This essay has proposed a method of grounding concepts in relevant cognates and examples, as Goffman tried to do in the case of mutual awareness and embarrassment. The strength of this method is that it avoids the thin air option, on the one hand, and also premature commitment to a particular theory, method or data, on the other. Instead it draws on diverse examples, helping to develop concepts that might have some palpable relationship to the human condition. The first two steps in the grounding of a concept would seem to involve:

1. List of the relationship of the new concept to already existing usage with respect to both vernacular and technical words and phrases.
2. Exploration of concrete examples, to show the plausibility and limitations of the new concept.

The listing of cognates might have the advantage of showing the interrelationship of studies that use different terms, and also make studies accessible to the public. There are many different disciplines now involved in the study of what I have called awareness structures here, but different terms are in use.

Psychologists, for example, use the tropes of mind reading and other minds. The phrase used in philosophy is also other minds or intersubjectivity, in psychiatry, also intersubjectivity or attunement, and in economics, "mutual knowledge." The only group that refers to the important theoretical work on this topic by C. H. Cooley and G. H. Mead is the one made up of sociological social psychologists. It is a Tower of Babel. Work in one discipline seldom refers to work in other disciplines. The reading public, of course, is shut out by all of the disciplinary worlds.

Since the grounding of concepts in this way takes a great deal of time and effort, and is indirect and roundabout, there must be a better way. Until one is found, however, this method might be helpful along with the other more established methods.

Endnotes

- i This essay expands one of the themes of Scheff 2006. The statements in boldface represent the central thesis in four different forms: 1. Title. 2. Abstract. 3. Text. 4. Conclusion. Through repetition, I try to avoid one of the flaws in much of Goffman's work, the absence of an explicitly named central thesis. I am indebted to Bengt Starrin for suggesting the title of this paper.
- ii Chapter 5 (Scheff 2006).
- iii Chapter 3 (Scheff 2006).
- iv Attunement is the term used by Stern (1977) in his studies of infant-caretaker relationships. It is difficult to choose a name for the state of mutual awareness in English, since our language establishes individuals as the fundamental unit, rather than pairs or larger groups.
- v Luiz Baptista called this quotation to my attention. As indicated earlier, the idea of levels of mutual awareness plays a prominent role in my discussion (2006, Chapter 5) of context and consensus.
- vi Bengt Starrin called this chapter to my attention.
- vii Although narratives are much better than thin air, they are still quite abstract, being verbal descriptions. Goffman went quite far with verbal texts. However, in developing concepts, especially emotion and relation concepts, verbatim recordings of discourse may ultimately be needed. Such records make available the verbal and non-verbal indicators of emotion and connectedness, the minute particulars.

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