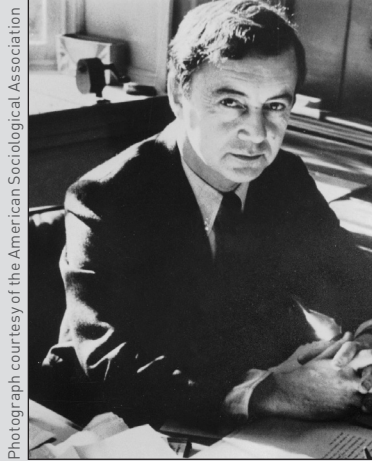


ERVING GOFFMAN

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



Photograph courtesy of the American Sociological Association

Erving Goffman died in 1982 at the peak of his fame. He had long been regarded as a “cult” figure in sociological theory. That status was achieved in spite of the fact that he had been a professor in the prestigious sociology department at the University of California, Berkeley, and later held an endowed chair at the Ivy League’s University of Pennsylvania (P. Manning, 2005b; G. Smith, 2007, 2011).

By the 1980s, he had emerged as a centrally important theorist. In fact, he had been elected president of the American Sociological Association in the year he died but was unable to give his presidential address because of advanced illness. Given Goffman’s maverick status, Randall Collins says of his address: “Everyone wondered what he would do for his Presidential address: a straight, tradi-

tional presentation seemed unthinkable for Goffman with his reputation as an iconoclast. . . . [W]e got a far more dramatic message: Presidential address cancelled, Goffman dying. It was an appropriately Goffmanian way to go out” (1986b:112).

Goffman was born in Alberta, Canada, on June 11, 1922 (S. Williams, 1986). He earned his advanced degrees from the University of Chicago and is most often thought of as a member of the Chicago school and as a symbolic interactionist. However, when he was asked shortly before his death whether he was a symbolic interactionist, he replied that the label was too vague to allow him to put himself in that category (P. Manning, 1992). In fact, it is hard to squeeze his work into any single category. In creating his theoretical perspective, Goffman drew on many sources and created a distinctive orientation.

Randall Collins (1986b; S. Williams, 1986) links Goffman more to social anthropology than to symbolic interactionism. As an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Goffman had studied with an anthropologist, and at Chicago “his main contacts were not with Symbolic Interactionists, but with W. Lloyd Warner [an anthropologist]” (R. Collins, 1986b:109). In Collins’s view, an examination of the citations in Goffman’s early work indicates that he was influenced by social anthropologists and rarely cited symbolic interactionists, and when he did, it was to be critical of them. However, Goffman was influenced by the descriptive studies produced at Chicago and integrated their outlook with that of social anthropology to produce his distinctive perspective. Thus, whereas a symbolic interactionist would look at how people create or negotiate their self-images, Goffman was concerned with how “society . . . forces people to present a certain image of themselves . . . because it forces us to switch back and forth between many complicated roles, is also making us always somewhat untruthful, inconsistent, and dishonorable” (R. Collins, 1986a:107).

Despite the distinctiveness of his perspective, Goffman had a powerful influence on symbolic interactionism. In addition, it could be argued that he had a hand in shaping another sociology of everyday life, ethnomethodology. In fact, Randall Collins sees Goffman as a key figure in the formation not only of ethnomethodology, but of conversation analysis as well: “It was