"Role Distance" is Suicide:
A Cumulative Development in
Theory

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ABSTRACT

Durkheim's *Suicide* and Goffman's "Role Distance" are re-examined to document a theoretical continuity in the two works. It is argued that Goffman's essay can be seen as an extension of the concepts and framework originally used by Durkheim to explain social suicide rates. The significant alterations and developments introduced by Goffman demonstrate that this is not simply a "mechanical" application of an old theory to new data, but is in fact a development of the theoretical paradigm.

Goffman's essay "Role Distance" (1961) has occasioned much good comment and secondary analysis including Rose Coser's "Role Distance", Sociological Ambivalence, and Transitional Status Systems" (1969). One aspect which has gone unnoticed, however, is the relationship between "Role Distance" and Durkheim's analysis of suicide. It is hoped that the tracing of this relationship may help to demonstrate that Goffman's work is not accurately pictured when it is seen merely as a collection of "insightful" observations, or examples of the "delightful" nuances of social life standing somewhere outside the realm of "legitimate" social thought and the discipline of Sociology. Some time ago Rose Coser attempted to integrate "Role Distance" into reference group theory, now an attempt will be made to unearth its roots in one of Durkheim's major works. If the attempt is successful we shall have located the theory in at least a tributary of "mainstream" Sociology gaining a better understanding of Goffman's theory and method in the process. Goffman suggests that when an individual 'breaks role' or indicated that what he is doing is not what he *is* he is responding to social pressures not unlike those Durkheim identified as suicidogenic. By transforming Durkheim's conceptualization to address more mundane, routine matters, Goffman is able to analyze behavior that has escaped traditional role analysis. A more detailed examination of *Suicide* and "Role Distance" provides textual support for this hypothesized theoretic continuity.

In *Suicide* (1966), Durkheim establishes a relation between collective (social)

facts and individual self-destruction. This is Durkheim's now famous notion that a society's suicide rate can only be explained sociologically. Properties of the social systems, not individual psychological aberrations, produce suicide *rates*. And though extremely high rates may be the indication of a pathological condition, the social system can be expected to generate a given number of suicides as the result of the very forces that secure and maintain collective existence. Suicide is thus shown to be a structural property of all societies, rather than an anomalous or avoidable occurrence.

Being 'normal' occurrences, suicides are not, however, typical or frequent. Even an extremely high suicide rate indicates that only a very small proportion of the population kill themselves. Part of the explanation as to why such diffuse social forces produce such 'limited' results is offered by Durkheim's conceptualization of suicide as lying at the extreme end of a continuum of effects.

> . . .suicides do not form, as might be thought, a wholly distinct group, or isolated class of monstrous phenomena, unrelated to other forms of conduct, but rather are related to them by a continuous series of intermediate cases. They are merely the exaggerated form of common practices. (Durkheim 1966:45)

This continuum helps explain both the theoretical similarities and the empirical differences in the two studies. For while Durkheim's pioneering study focuses on the "monstrous" phenomena, Goffman develops and extends the approach to the "common practices". Durkheim explores the extreme actions of a limited number of the social population; Goffman explores the limited actions of extreme numbers of the social population. Suicide might indeed be envisioned as the most extreme display of role distance, but Goffman's development focuses on the less extreme instances embodied in the "typical role" since this "routinized sociological feature" has repeatedly escaped analysis.

To demonstrate this transformation we must return to Durkheim for the particulars of his theory and then progress to the parallels in Goffman's work. In altruistic and egoistic suicide, Durkheim postulates a conflict or tension between a social "self" and a non-social (individual) "self":

> To be sure in so far as we are solidary with the group and share its life we are exposed to their influence; but so far as we have a distinct personality of our own we rebel against and try to escape them. Since everyone leads this sort of double existence simultaneously, each of us has a double impulse. We are drawn in a social direction, and tend to follow the inclination of our own natures. (Durkheim 1966:319)

This "double existence" manifests itself in the conflict between the individual and the collective.

> One, the collective force, tries to take possession of the individual; the other the individual force, repulses it. (Durkheim 1966:319)

When these forces are in equilibrium the individual is protected or shielded from suicidal impulses, but if either assumes undue influence it loses its protective property and becomes itself suicidogenic.

A similar conflict is the basis of Goffman's explanation of role distance.

> I have argued that a situated activity system provides an arena for conduct and that in this arena the individual constantly twists, turns, and squirms even while allowing himself to be carried along by the controlling definition of the situation. (Goffman 1961:139)

There is, however, an important difference not only in regard to the action taken in response to the conflict, but in regard to the elements of the conflict as well. Durkheim identified the two competing forces as the individual and the collective, and while it is not clear exactly how "social" this individual component is, what is clear is that for Goffman the conflict exists between selves that are both eminently social. The selves in Goffman are both social products: the one a situationally dictated self, and the other the product of a more inclusive or more permanent role.

Goffman initiates this analysis by examining the "selves" that are generated in "situated activity systems". In such systems the individual finds that a "self. . . virtually awaits the individual entering a position; he need only conform to the pressure on him and he will find a *me* readymade for him." (Goffman 1961:87-88). For the most part the situation flows smoothly and the activity engaged in by the individual conveys an acceptable and consistent self-image. But since all activities cannot be anticipated and their "self" generating signs controlled, dissonant and unacceptable selves may be conveyed by behavior that the situated system makes compulsory. It is at this point that the actor will express a disjunction between his "doing" and his "being."

> Explanations, apologies, and joking are all ways in which the individual makes a plea for disqualifying some of the expressive features of the situation as sources of definition of himself. (Goffman 1961: 105)

This is the expression of role distance which appears as a "natural" if not normatively governed aspect of the "typical role" in situated activity systems.

When these systems are located in the larger social structure, the normative aspect comes clearly into focus.

> When we shift our point of reference from the situated system, then, to these wider entities, role distance can again be seen as a response to a normative framework. As far as merry-go-round riding is concerned the role distance exhibited by an eight-year-old boy is a typical not obligatory, part of the situation; for the boy's manhood, however, these expressions are obligatory. A statistical departure in the first case would be a moral departure in the second. (Goffman 1961: 143)

Distance from the role of a situated system is the result of conflict with a more permanent and more normatively coercive role in the larger system. The individual-collective conflict of Durkheim is transformed into collective-collective conflict in Goffman. It should be noted that the activities indexing role distance; "sullenness, muttering, irony, joking, and sarcasm. . . " (p. 114) are not creations of the individual, ". . . but are drawn from what society allots him." (p.139). We thus find that the pressures to exhibit role distance and the means by which it is expressed are both normatively prescribed.[1] "External and coercive" is in fact a rather accurate description of their status in regard to the individual actor.

It is at this point that we may venture to state that both Durkheim and Goffman are dealing with social forces impelling individuals to "selfdestruction," without appearing facetious.
Durkheim with the ultimate display of role distance-destruction of the organism, and Goffman with the destruction of an inappropriate self by denying its "reality." Role distance is in fact "self-distance":

> A short hand is involved here: the individual is actually denying not the role but the virtual self that is implied in the role for all accepting performers. (Goffman 1961:108)

This is the solution to the problem raised by Coser when she comments: "One wonders what it is that he (the actor) takes *distance* from." (Coser 1966:175). It also indicates that the self in self-destruction can be taken quite literally as long as it is not confused with the organism to which a self is imputed.

Thus while the "self-destruction" analyzed by Durkheim was one that created a distance from all roles and their imputed selves, that studied by Goffman is the more common action where the rejection of one self is only a means of preserving another. To completely accept the situated role, or to "embrace" it as Goffman would say, is not an exception but merely another form of self-destruction. For by embracing the role one destroys for that time all other selves.

> To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation. To be fully seen in terms of the image, and confirm expressively one's acceptance of it. To embrace a role is to be embraced by it. (Goffman 1961:106)

As altruistic suicide demonstrates in the extreme, to be embraced is possibly to be smothered.

Thus Durkheim's sociological explanation of suicide can be seen to be developed by Goffman to cover less drastic and more typical social behaviors. (Goffman suggests that there may be even less drastic, less apparent effects of these social forces, indicating that role distance does not lie at the lowest level of the continuum.) Goffman has addressed and explicated the more "common practices" mentioned by Durkheim, and appears to have outdone Durkheim in rooting their

causes in the social structure by transforming the individual-collective conflict into a conflict between collective elements. The tension between these potentially conflicting selves being normatively prescribed, with even the most demanding roles evidencing the slippage necessary for adequate functioning.

Goffman has not simply "taken" Durkheim's theory and mechanically applied it to a different set of data, he has developed it to make it adequate to the task.[2] The basic steps taken were: re-application to the ordinary, refinement of the qualitative relationships, and stronger rooting in the social structure. It should be noted that in so doing Goffman has continued to apply Durkheim's dictum that a social fact be used to explain a social fact.[3] More importantly, perhaps, he has extended the domain of social facts to once again explain a behavior that was thought to be entirely due to psychological causes and wholly amenable to psychological explanation. Thus Goffman's essay is not simply an interesting, but theoretically isolated exercise; it is an extension and development of "legitimate" theory.

FOOTNOTES

1. One reviewer of this essay familiar with the phenomenology of suicide reminds us that suicide itself is a socially structured and normatively governed action. The act of suicide constituting ". . a gesture to show that one retains one's commitment to certain expectations regarding life and the self in the face of performances that have fallen short."

2. The question of whether or not Goffman is "aware" of the continuity and development of Durkheim's idea(s) in his work, occurs at this point (this is the reason for the quotation marks around "taken") and the reviewer who raised this question also noted that none of the 53 footnotes in Goffman's essay refer to Durkheim. However, since Goffman's subjective intentions are not revealed in the essay I cannot say whether this was a selfconscious process or not. More importantly, perhaps, although the question may be of considerable interest, it is not really pertinent to the textual examination presented here. In this essay the two texts are taken as documents and are analyzed as such were the focus of interest not the subjective intentions of the actors that produced them. Parallels and continuities with Durkheim's work permeate Goffman's essays and this paper has sought to trace and document one of them. It is an interesting question because Goffman's method is one which locates motive, intention and meaning in the structure and semiotic of situations not in the subjective experience of actors. Motive and meaning are ascertained by a structural analysis of events rather than by attempting to penetrate the subjective states of actors. It is ironic, therefore, that Goffman's awareness or subjective intentions should arise in this instance.

3. Suggested by Charles Hechter.

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