

Interaction Ritual Chains



Randall Collins

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A list of titles in this series appears at the back of the book.

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List of Figures

Preface

Acknowledgments

PART I. Radical Microsociology

CHAPTER 1

The Program of Interaction Ritual Theory

Situation rather than Individual as Starting Point

Conflicting Terminologies

Traditions of Ritual Analysis

Subcognitive Ritualism

Functionalist Ritualism

Goffman's Interaction Ritual

The Code-Seeking Program

The Cultural Turn

Classic Origins of IR Theory in Durkheim's Sociology of Religion

The Significance of Interaction Ritual for General Sociological Theory

CHAPTER 2

The Mutual-Focus / Emotional-Entrainment Model

Ritual Ingredients, Processes, and Outcomes

Formal Rituals and Natural Rituals

Failed Rituals, Empty Rituals, Forced Rituals

Is Bodily Presence Necessary?

The Micro-Process of Collective Entrainment in Natural Rituals

Conversational Turn-Taking as Rhythmic Entrainment

Experimental and Micro-Observational Evidence on Rhythmic Coordination and Emotional Entrainment

Joint Attention as Key to Development of Shared Symbols

Solidarity Prolonged and Stored in Symbols

The Creation of Solidarity Symbols in 9/11

Rules for Unraveling Symbols

CHAPTER 3

Emotional Energy and the Transient Emotions

Disruptive and Long-Term Emotions, or Dramatic Emotions and Emotional Energy

Interaction Ritual as Emotion Transformer

Stratified Interaction Rituals

<i>Power Rituals</i>	11
<i>Status Rituals</i>	11
<i>Effects on Long-Term Emotions: Emotional Energy</i>	11
<i>Emotion Contest and Conflict Situations</i>	12
<i>Short-Term or Dramatic Emotions</i>	12
<i>Transformations from Short-Term Emotions into Long-Term EE</i>	12
<i>The Stratification of Emotional Energy</i>	13
<i>Appendix: Measuring Emotional Energy and Its Antecedents</i>	13

CHAPTER 4 14

Interaction Markets and Material Markets

<i>Problems of the Rational Cost-Benefit Model</i>	14
<i>The Rationality of Participating in Interaction Rituals</i>	14
<i>The Market for Ritual Solidarity</i>	14
<i>Reinvestment of Emotional Energy and Membership Symbols</i>	14
<i>Match-Ups of Symbols and Complementarity of Emotions</i>	15
<i>Emotional Energy as the Common Denominator of Rational Choice</i>	15
<i>I. Material Production Is Motivated by the Need for Resources for Producing IRs</i>	16
<i>II. Emotional Energy Is Generated by Work-Situation IRs</i>	16
<i>III. Material Markets Are Embedded in an Ongoing Flow of IRs Generating Social Capital</i>	16
<i>Altruism</i>	16
<i>When Are Individuals Most Materially Self-Interested?</i>	17
<i>The Bottom Line: EE-Seeking Constrained by Material Resources</i>	17
<i>Sociology of Emotions as the Solution to Rational Choice Anomalies</i>	17
<i>The Microsociology of Material Considerations</i>	17
<i>Situational Decisions without Conscious Calculation</i>	18

CHAPTER 5 18

Internalized Symbols and the Social Process of Thinking

<i>Methods for Getting Inside, or Back Outside</i>	18
<i>Intellectual Networks and Creative Thinking</i>	19
<i>Non-Intellectual Thinking</i>	19
<i>Anticipated and Reverberated Talk</i>	19
<i>Thought Chains and Situational Chains</i>	19
<i>The Metaphor of Dialogue among Parts of the Self</i>	20
<i>Verbal Incantations</i>	20
<i>Speeds of Thought</i>	21
<i>Internal Ritual and Self-Solidarity</i>	21

PART II. Applications

CHAPTER 6 22

A Theory of Sexual Interaction

Sex as Individual Pleasure-Seeking 22

Sex as Interaction Ritual 23

Nongenital Sexual Pleasures as Symbolic Targets 23

Sexual Negotiation Scenes rather than Constant Sexual Essences 25

Prestige-Seeking and Public Eroticization 25

CHAPTER 7 25

Situational Stratification 25

Macro- and Micro-Situational Class, Status, and Power 26

Economic Class as Zelizer Circuits 26

Status Group Boundaries and Categorical Identities 26

Categorical Deference and Situational Deference 27

D-Power and E-Power 28

Historical Change in Situational Stratification 28

An Imagery for Contemporary Interaction 29

CHAPTER 8 29

Tobacco Ritual and Anti-Ritual: Substance Ingestion as a History of Social Boundaries 29

Inadequacies of the Health and Addiction Model 29

Tobacco Rituals: Relaxation / Withdrawal Rituals, Carousing Rituals, Elegance Rituals 30

Ritual Paraphernalia: Social Display and Solitary Cult 31

Failures and Successes of Anti-Tobacco Movements 32

Aesthetic Complaints and Struggle over Status Display Standards 32

Anti-Carousing Movements 32

The End of Enclave Exclusion: Respectable Women Join the Carousing Cult 32

The Health-Oriented Anti-Smoking Movement of the Late Twentieth Century 33

The Vulnerability of Situational Rituals and the Mobilization of Anti-Carousing Movements 33

CHAPTER 9 34

Individualism and Inwardness as Social Products 34

The Social Production of Individuality 34

Seven Types of Introversion 35

Work-Obsessed Individuals 35

Socially Excluded Persons 35

Situational Introverts 35

Alienated Introverts 35

Solitary Cultists 35

Intellectual Introverts 35

Neurotic or Hyper-Reflexive Introverts 36

The Micro-History of Introversion 36

Notes

37

References

41

Index

43

- 2.1 Interaction ritual. 4
- 2.2 Celebrating victory by ritualized full-body contact. U.S. and Russian troops converge in Germany (April 1945). Courtesy of Getty Images. 5
- 2.3 Marking the end of World War II (August 14, 1945). Courtesy of Philadelphia Newspapers, Inc. 5
- 2.4 A ritual victory pile-on: high school hockey championship (2002). *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Peter Tobia. 5
- 2.5 The preacher as a sacred object: Billy Graham and admirers (1962). Courtesy of Getty Images. 6
- 2.6 NY City firefighter in process of becoming hero symbol (September 14, 2001). AP/World Wide Photos, Doug Mills. 8
- 2.7 Street crowd running from World Trade Center area as first tower collapses (September 11, 2001). AP/World Wide Photos, Paul Hawthorne. 9
- 2.8 NY firefighters struggle with police over access to WTC site. Firefighters wear full paraphernalia for symbolic effect, although salvage work had previously been done in casual work dress (November 2, 2001). Richard Perry, *The New York Times*. 9
- 3.1 Winner focuses on the goal, loser focuses on the winner. Final lap of relay race, which runner E is about to win. *Philadelphia Inquirer*, David Swansea. 12
- 4.1 Flow chart of interaction ritual. 14
- 4.2 Payoffs for sustaining mutual focus. 14
- 4.3 Interaction ritual chains. 15
- 4.4 Interaction ritual and production of material resources. 15
- 6.1 Sexual intercourse as interaction ritual. 23
- 7.1 Continuum of formal and informal rituals. 27
- 7.2 Eton boys in upper-class regalia arriving for cricket match, cheekily (and uneasily) observed by working-class boys (England, 1930s). Courtesy of Getty Images. 27
- 7.3 D-power in action: serving refreshments to upper-class cricket players (England, 1920s). Courtesy of Getty Images. 28
- 7.4 Situational dominance by energy and sexuality: impromptu dancers during a counterculture gathering (1960s). Courtesy of Getty Images. 29
- 8.1 Cigar-smoking as class marker: a working-class admirer makes deferential contact with Winston Churchill, yet with a gesture of ritual solidarity in offering a light. Courtesy of Getty Images. 31
- 8.2 Two emblems of middle-class respectability: a pipe and a cup of tea (England, 1924). Courtesy of Getty Images. 31
- 8.3 One of the first women smokers of the respectable classes. In emulation of male traditions, she wears a special smoking outfit (England, 1922). Courtesy of Getty Images. 32
- 8.4 FDR's trademark cigarette holder (1930s). AP/World Wild Photos. 32
- 8.5 Women workers, drawn into service in male jobs during World War II, share a cigarette break. Courtesy of Getty Images. 32
- 8.6 The flapper era: self-consciously daring young women share the cigarette-lighting ritual (1928). Courtesy of Getty Images. 33
- 8.7 The height of the socially legitimated carousing scene (London during World War II). Courtesy

- 8.8 “Hippie” counterculture. Its ritual was smoking marijuana, in pointed contrast to the cigarette-smoking and alcohol-drinking of the previous generation (late 1960s). Courtesy of Getty Images. 34
- 9.1 Ideal type personalities from status and power dimensions. 34
- 9.2 Multiple personality types from status and power dimensions. 35

THIS BOOK ARGUES for the continuity of a chief theoretical pathway from classic sociology to the present. Durkheim launched sociology on a high theoretical level by providing an explanation for some of the most central questions: what produces social membership, moral beliefs, and the ideas with which people communicate and think. The key is that these are linked together by the same mechanism: ideas are symbols of group membership, and thus culture is generated by the moral—which is to say emotional—patterns of social interaction. But whereas Durkheim is usually interpreted, and subjected to criticism, as a global theory of the moral integration of an entire society, I interpret the theory through the eyes of Erving Goffman and the microsociological movement; that is to say, in the spirit of symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, social constructionism, and sociology of emotions. In the spirit, however, not the letter, since I put the ritual mechanism at the center and try to show how it makes maximal explanatory power out of the insights of these micro-sociological perspectives. Starting with a Durkheimian mechanism, we can see how variations in the intensity of rituals lead to variations in social membership patterns and the ideas that accompany them; all this takes place not on the global level of a “society” in the large sense, but as memberships that are local, sometimes ephemeral, stratified, and conflictual.

I do not insist on the letter of Durkheim or Goffman either, but on the fruitfulness of what we can do with these ideas for theorizing a social world of flux and variation. [Chapter 1](#) sketches the intellectual history of the social theory of ritual, with an eye to disencumbering what is most useful in the Durkheim tradition, from interpretations that have grown up around it like vines upon old trees in the jungle. Once having disentangled it, I amalgamate it with what is most useful in radical microsociology. Here Goffman is a pathbreaker, but I do some disentangling, too, to separate out what parts of Goffman are most useful for the current project.

[Chapter 2](#) presents my formulation of the theoretical model, which I call by Goffman's term, interaction ritual (for short, IR). Since terminological accretions are hard to slough off, we are not necessarily confined to calling it by this term. We could call it, more generically, the mutual-focus / emotional-entrainment mechanism. It is a model of interactional situations varying along those two dimensions—how much mutual focus of attention occurs, and how much emotional entrainment builds up among the participants. Where mutual focus and entrainment become intense, self-reinforcing feedback processes generate moments of compelling emotional experience. These in turn become motivational magnets and moments of cultural significance, experiences where culture is created, denigrated, or reinforced. [Chapter 3](#) illustrates the process of creating symbols by analyzing a first-hand video recording of the creation of new national symbols during the catastrophe of 9/11/2001. Rituals create symbols in first-order, face-to-face interaction, which constitutes the starting point in an array of further second- and third-order circuits in which symbols can be recirculated. Once infused with situational emotion, symbols can be circulated through networks of conversation, and internalized as thinking within the individual circuits of the mind. Ultimately the intensity of human concern with symbols, ranging from enthusiastic and obsessive to bored and alienated, depends upon periodic repetition of IRs; how meaningful these recirculated symbols are

depends on what level of emotional intensity is reached in the first-order social encounters which those symbols are used. Since we are often confronted with symbols apart from the interactional context that determines how alive they are, I offer some rules for unraveling symbols by tracing them back to the interactional situations in which they acquire their emotional significance they have, and then through their recycling in conversational networks and solitary experience.

Chapters 3 through 5 examine the implications of the IR mechanism. Chapter 3 presents an interactional theory of emotions. It emphasizes the differences among the specific emotions as conventionally recognized—anger, joy, fear, etc.—and the social emotion par excellence that I call emotional energy, or EE. Durkheim noted that a successful social ritual makes the individual participant feel strong, confident, full of impulses to take the initiative. Part of the collective effervescence of a highly focused, emotionally entrained interaction is apportioned to the individuals, who come away from the situation carrying the grouparoused emotion for a time in their bodies. Conversely, a weak or failed social ritual lowers the confidence and initiative of participants—it lowers their EE—as does being in the position of an outsider or victim who is emotionally battered by someone else's interaction ritual that does not allow one inside. An interaction ritual is an emotion transformer, taking some emotions as ingredients, and turning them into other emotions as outcomes. Short-term situational emotions carry across situations, in the form of emotional energy, with its hidden resonance of group membership, setting up chains of interaction rituals over time. Membership and its boundaries, solidarity, high and low emotional energy: these features work together. Hence the stratification of interaction—interacting with people who are higher or lower in power and interacting from a position of status acceptance or rejection—gives each individual a jolt upward or downward, to their level of EE. Social structure, viewed up close as a chain of interactional situations, is an ongoing process of stratifying individuals by their emotional energy.

Privilege and power is not simply a result of unequal material and cultural resources. It is the flow of emotional energy across situations that makes some individuals more impressive, more attractive or dominant; the same situational flow puts other persons in their shadow, narrowing their sources of EE to the alternatives of participating as followers or being relegated passively to the sidelines. Social dominance—whether it takes the form of leadership, popularity, intellectual innovativeness, or physical aggressiveness—is often acceded to by others who encounter such a person, because it occurs through emotional processes that pump some individuals up while depressing others.

Chapter 4 shows how IRs produce the flow of motivation from situation to situation. I widen IR theory so as to predict what will happen as individuals steer from one situation to another, by borrowing concepts from rational choice theory. Some social theorists may find the mixture uncomfortable or even heretical. On the face of it, the image of the calculating self-interested individual seems at odds with the Durkheimian micro-collectivity with its moral solidarity. My rationale is that rational choice theory is not really a model of situational interaction, but a meso-level theory of what individuals will do over the medium run of situations over a period of time. Choice implies working out alternatives, and in real life these present themselves gradually and through experience over a series of occasions. The anomalies of rational choice analysis arise because individuals in micro-situations do not

calculate very well the range of alternatives hypothetically available to them; but calculation is not what is most useful in this model, but rather the propensity of individuals to drift consciously or unconsciously, toward those situations where there is the greatest payoff of benefits over costs. Humans are not very good at calculating costs and benefits, but they feel their way toward goals because they can judge everything subconsciously by its contribution to a fundamental motive: seeking maximal emotional energy in interaction rituals.

The aggregate of situations can be regarded as a market for interaction rituals. The concept is not so startling if we recall the familiar sociological concept of a marriage market. Consider also its extension to the concept of sexual-preference markets (i.e. competitive matchups in a pool of available potential partners for short-term sexual and romantic relationships subdivided by heterosexual and homosexual markets, and so on), and the notion of the market dynamics of friendship formation. Thus we may conceive of all IRs as a market. I do not mean this formulation to be offensive to people's humanistic sensibilities; people who seek romantic partners or make close friends are often genuinely committed to these relationships; they feel at home inside a common horizon of cultural experience; and they share positive emotions in an unselfconscious, noncalculating way. But these are micro-level contents of these interactions; the market aspect comes in at the mesolevel, the aggregate of interactions among which individuals implicitly or explicitly choose. Not everyone can be lovers or close friends with everyone else, and the range of who is available and who has already committed themselves to someone else will have an inescapable effect on even the most romantic.

What I call IR chains is a model of motivation that pulls and pushes individuals from situation to situation, steered by the market-like patterns of how each participant's stock of social resources—their EE and their membership symbols (or cultural capital) accumulated in previous IRs—meshes with those of each person they encounter. The degree to which these elements mesh makes up the ingredients for what kind of IR will happen when these persons meet. The relative degree of emotional intensity that each IR reaches is implicitly compared with other IRs within those persons' social horizons, drawing individuals to social situations where they feel more emotionally involved, and away from other interactions that have lower emotional magnetism or an emotional repulsion. The market for EE in IRs thus is an over-arching mechanism motivating individuals as they move through the IR chains that make up their lives.

What I have done here is to give a theory of individuals' motivation based on where they are located at any moment in time in the aggregate of IR chains that makes up their market of possible social relationships. We can also turn this picture around to see it from another angle. Instead of focusing on the individual, we can look at the structuring of an entire social arena or institution as a linkage of IR chains. The institution that I have in mind here is the economy in the narrow sense of the term: that is, markets for labor, goods, and financial instruments (for short, "material markets"). According to the well-known theory in economic sociology, material markets are embedded in relations of social trust and implicit rules of the game. I translate this into a situationally fluctuating pattern. What economic sociologists treat rather abstractly as "trust" is not a static element nor merely a background that sets up the arena for the economic game but upon which economic motives provide the dynamics of action. What we think of as "social embedding" is in fact in the center of economic action.

Any successful IRs produce moral solidarity, which is another word for “trust”; but the IR chain produces more than trust, since the full-scale process of individual motivation is generated in IR chains. The mechanism is the same whether these chains are focused on material economic activities or on purely sociable relationships. EE-seeking is the master motive across all institutional arenas; and thus it is the IRs that generate differing levels of EE in economic life that set the motivation to work at a level of intensity ranging from enthusiastically to slackly; to engage in entrepreneurship or shy away from it; to join in a wave of investment or to pull one’s money and one’s emotional attention away from financial markets.

There is no sharp break between material markets and the market for emotional payoffs. IRs; these are all motivated by EE-seeking. Of course, participating in the material market is often less enthusiastic than constrained and perfunctory, making ends meet rather than positively seeking high emotional experiences. As hard-bitten realists would say, people work not for rituals but because they need material goods to survive. My counterargument is that social motivation determines even when people want to survive, as well as more normally what they want material goods for. Variations in intensity of economic action are determined from the side of variations in social motivation. The material market is motivated by demand for material goods because material resources are among the ingredients needed to produce intense IR experiences. There are feedback loops between the material economy and the economy of rituals; each is a necessary input into the other. In Max Weber’s version, the intensity of motivation for a particular kind of religious experience drove the expansion of modern capitalism. In my generalization of this line of argument, the entire socialinteractional marketplace for IRs is what drives the motivation to work, produce, invest, and consume in the material market. At the level of general theory, it is impossible to explain human behavior by separate spheres of motivation without a common denominator among them, since that would leave no way of choosing among them in concrete situations. The theoretical solution is to conceive of the market for high-intensity IRs and the market for material goods as unified, one flowing into the other. Although we cannot get from material motivations to deriving social motivations, we can unify these realms from the social rather than the material side.

Chapter 5 rounds out the applications of the basic IR mechanism with a theory of thinking. The central point is that IRs charge up ideas with varying degrees of membership significance by marking them with differing amounts of EE. Some ideas are therefore easier to think with than others—for particular individuals in a particular situation located in a chain of situations. Such ideas spring to the mind, or flow trippingly on the tongue, whereas other ideas are less attracted into the interaction, or even excluded from it by a tacit social barrier. Thinking is an internalized conversation—a theoretical point familiar from George Herbert Mead—and thus we can trace the inner linkages of ideas from external conversations through internal conversations and back out. This tracing is easiest to do empirically in the thinking of intellectuals, since we know more about their social networks with other intellectuals, and about the inner thinking that became externalized in their writing. From this entry point, the chapter moves on to forms of thinking that are only quasi-verbal, as well as verbal incantations and internal rituals that make inner selves so often different from outer selves. I offer examples, inspired by conversation analysis, of how to study internalized conversational

empirically. The chapter draws considerably on the symbolic interactionist tradition, ranging from the classics to contemporary analyses by Jonathan Turner, Norbert Wiley, Thomas Scheff, and Jack Katz, among others. It concludes, nevertheless, that Mead's metaphors of the parts of the self (I, me, Generalized Other) can be replaced by a more processual model of the focus of attention and flow of energy in internalized interaction rituals.

Part II applies the general theory to specialized and historically located areas of social life. **Chapter 6** is a theory of sexual interaction, treated micro-empirically: that is to say, what people actually do in erotic situations. It is not, first and foremost, a theory of what cultural meanings about sex exist in a culture, nor does it stay on the level of what statistics aggregate of sexual actions individuals perform with what degree of frequency; it is instead a theory of what kind of interaction actually happens when people have sex. What this is might seem obvious, but when examined sociologically large alternatives of interpretation open up. What people actually do, and what they find erotically stimulating, cannot be explained by individual motives of pleasure-seeking; what practices are considered sexual and what bodily zones become erotic targets are both historically and situationally variable. The erotic symbolism of the body is constructed by the focus and intensity of interaction rituals. The baseline form of erotic action—sexual intercourse—fits the IR model very closely. No wonder: sexual intercourse is an archetypal high point of mutual entrainment and collective effervescence, creating the most primitive form of solidarity and the most immediate standards of morality; the interlocking feelings of love and sexual possession are a ritual of very tight membership in a group usually of size two.

On this baseline model, I show how nongenital sexual targets are constructed as they become the focus of attention in erotic IRs. Sexual ritual can also take forms that have relatively low solidarity among the participants—sex that is selfish, coerced, or otherwise not oriented toward membership with the partner of the moment. But these forms of sex do not escape social explanation: these are forms of sexual action in which the focus of attention is not so much local but in another arena, not on the relationship between the individual lovers but on the larger scenes of erotic negotiation and display in which they seek membership and prestige. The micro-level of sexual interaction is shaped within a larger arena, a concatenation of IR chains. I illustrate this with the historical changes in the places where sexual negotiating and sexual carousing have taken place during the twentieth century and in the array of practices that have thereby become eroticized. Among other things that can be explained in this way are the growth of distinctively modern forms of homosexuality.

Chapter 7 offers a micro-sociological view of stratification in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. I describe stratification as seen from below, from the angle of the situations in which inequality actually is acted out. This micro-empirical view matches up, eventually, with the Weberian scheme of economic class, status group, and political power, but instead of taking these as macro-structures that can be grasped in their aggregated statistical form, it shows how they can be recast in terms of the dynamics of everyday life. In our historical times, immediate social experience has come loose from the categorical identities of macro-stratification, giving greater weight to the dynamics of situational stratification. The changing distribution of resources for staging interaction rituals, and the changing conditions that once compelled people to be audiences for stratified rituals and now enable them to evade them, explain how this evaporation of deference rituals has come

about.

Chapter 8 takes up a set of minor rituals that are carried out in private and in leisure situations, off duty from serious occasions. Such rituals have their historical ups and downs which gives us an opportunity to look at the changing social ingredients that have gone into constructing these little rituals of privacy and sociability. Erving Goffman pioneered the study of such rituals, but as a pioneer he was too concerned with showing their general properties to pay attention to how they have changed historically. Ironically, he wrote just at the time that a massive shift in the rituals of everyday life was going on: the collapse of formal, polite, overtly stratified boundary-marking rituals, which observers of the 1960s sometimes called the rise of the “counterculture” and which I prefer to call the “Goffmanian revolution.” It is this revolution favoring standards of casualness over standards of formality that characterizes the situational stratification of the turn of the twenty-first century, where overt signs of class differences are hidden and formality is widely considered bad form. This is a recent instance of a shift in the prevailing rituals of everyday life, one of a series of such shifts that have taken place across the centuries.

Chapter 8 traces these micro-structural shifts in the ritualism of casual interaction by taking smoking rituals as a tracer element. The conditions that created various kinds of tobacco rituals since the sixteenth century, and fostered conflict over the legitimacy of such rituals throughout that time, cast light more generally on other kinds of substance ingestion. The same kind of analysis could have been performed by focusing on the social history of alcohol or drug use. These have been heavily studied by other researchers, although generally under other theoretical lenses; the analysis of tobacco ritual and anti-ritual may thus be fresh enough to bring out the analytical points more clearly.

The opportunity to change our perceptual gestalts, at least as sociologists, is all the greater because we are living in the midst of an underanalyzed phenomenon in everyday life: the success, after many centuries of failure, of an anti-smoking movement in the late twentieth century. The naïve explanation would be simply that medical evidence has now become available to show the dangers of tobacco, and that the movement to restrict and prohibit has followed as a matter of normal public policy. Yet it would be theoretically strange if that were all there is to it. Our theories of social movements, of politics, of changes in lifestyle do not generally show much evidence that major social changes come about simply because scientists intervene to tell people what they must do for their material self-interest whereupon they do it. This naïve explanation is generally unchallenged, within sociology and elsewhere in the academic world, perhaps because most sociologists are in the status group that is most committed to the antismoking movement; thus we do not see the triumph of the anti-smoking movement as a social phenomenon to be explained, because we view the issue through the categories promulgated by that movement. Ideological participants do not make good analysts of their own movement. By the same token, we are not very good analysts of the target of the movement, tobacco users in all their historical forms, as long as we see them only in the categories of addicts or dupes of media advertising in which they are conventionally discussed. By viewing the entire historical process with greater detachment, it is possible to contribute to a sociological, and not merely medical, understanding of addictive or persistently entraining forms of substance ingestion generally.

Rituals of bodily ingestion always have a physiological aspect, but that is not good

theoretical grounds for handing over primacy to nonsocial scientists when we are explaining social behavior. Interaction rituals in general are processes that take place as human bodies come close enough to each other so that their nervous systems become mutually attuned to the rhythms and anticipations of each other, and the physiological substratum that produces emotions in one individual's body becomes stimulated in feedback loops that run through the other person's body. Within that moment at least, the social interaction is driving the physiology. This is the normal baseline of human interaction, even without any ingestion of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, caffeine, or food; and when ingestion of these is added to the interaction ritual, their physiological effects are deeply entwined with and shaped by the social pattern. I am arguing for a strong form of social construction, not only of conscious mental processes, not only of emotions, but also of the experience of whatever is bodily ingested. The chemical character of whatever kind of substance is ingested also has some independent effect, and in some instances that effect may be overriding: strychnine will not act like sugar. But we would be entirely on the wrong footing to assume that all ingested substances are in the extreme categories like strychnine; most of the socially popular substances for bodily ingestion have had widely differing effects in different social contexts, and it is their social uses that have determined what people have made of them. Even in the instance of tobacco use in the late twentieth century, the overriding causal factors determining usage have been not in the physical effects per se but in those effects as socially experienced.

The aggregate effect of these chapters may be to provoke the question, doesn't all this sociologizing go too far? Doesn't it miss what escapes sociology, what makes us unique as individuals, and what constitutes our private inner experience? Is not the model of interaction rituals especially biased toward the image of the human being as the noisy extrovert, always seeking crowds, never alone, without an inner life? [Chapter 9](#) meets these issues head on. Individualism itself is a social product. As Durkheim and his followers, notably Marcel Mauss, argued, social structures across the range of human history have produced a variety of individuals to just the extent that social structures are differentiated: the greater variety of social situations, the more unique each individual's experience, and the greater variety of individuals. Furthermore, it is not only a matter of society in some historical formations producing a greater or lesser variety of individuals; some societies—most notably our own—produce an ideal or ideology of individualism. Social interactions produce both symbols and moralizing about them. Where the ritualism of social interaction celebrating the collective has dwindled, what has arisen in its place are situational rituals involving what Goffman pointed to as the cult of the individual.

Individuality comes in many different forms, many of which could be extroverted; so it remains to be shown how inwardly oriented personalities are socially created. I outline several kinds of introversion together with the historical conditions that have produced them. Despite our image of introversion as a modern personality type, some of these types are rather common premodern personalities. Even in the modern world, there are several types of introverts, besides the hyper-reflexive or neurotic type, which some observers have seen as the image of Hamlet or a Freudian patient as emblematic of modern life. In fact, most types of introversion are not only socially produced, but have their patterns, when situations call for it, of extroverted social interaction as well. Even within the most extreme personalities

inward and outward play off of each other in an endless chain.

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Radical Microsociology

THE PROGRAM OF INTERACTION RITUAL THEORY

A THEORY OF INTERACTION ritual is the key to microsociology, and microsociology is the key much that is larger. The smallscale, the here-and-now of face-to-face interaction, is the scene of action and the site of social actors. If we are going to find the agency of social life, it will be here. Here reside the energy of movement and change, the glue of solidarity, and the conservatism of stasis. Here is where intentionality and consciousness find their places; here, too, is the site of the emotional and unconscious aspects of human interaction. In whatever idiom, here is the empirical / experiential location for our social psychology, our symbolic interaction, our strategic interaction, our existential phenomenology or ethnomethodology, our arena of bargaining, games, exchange, or rational choice. Such theoretical positions may already seem to be extremely micro, intimate, and small scale. Yet we shall see they are for the most part not micro enough; some are mere glosses over what happens on the micro-interactional level. If we develop a sufficiently powerful theory on the micro-level, it will unlock some secrets of large-scale macrosociological changes as well.

Let us begin with two orienting points. First, the center of microsociological explanation is not the individual but the situation. Second, the term “ritual” is used in a confusing variety of ways; I must show what I will mean by it and why this approach yields the desired explanatory results.

Situation rather than Individual as Starting Point

Selecting an analytical starting point is a matter of strategic choice on the part of the theorist. But it is not merely an unreasoning *de gustibus non disputandum est*. I will attempt to show why we get more by starting with the situation and developing the individual, than by starting with individuals; and we get emphatically more than by the usual route of skipping from the individual to the action or cognition that ostensibly belongs to him or her and bypassing the situation entirely.

A theory of interaction ritual (IR) and interaction ritual chains is above all a theory of situations. It is a theory of momentary encounters among human bodies charged up with emotions and consciousness because they have gone through chains of previous encounters. What we mean by the social actor, the human individual, is a quasi-enduring, quasi-transient flux in time and space. Although we valorize and heroize this individual, we ought to recognize that this way of looking at things, this keyhole through which we peer at the universe, is the product of particular religious, political, and cultural trends of recent centuries. It is an ideology of how we regard it proper to think about ourselves and others, part of the folk idiom, not the most useful analytical starting point for microsociology.

This is not to say that the individual does not exist. But an individual is not simply a body

even though a body is an ingredient that individuals get constructed out of. My analytic strategy (and that of the founder of interaction ritual analysis, Erving Goffman), is to start with the dynamics of situations; from this we can derive almost everything that we want to know about individuals, as a moving precipitate across situations.

Here we might pause for a counterargument. Do we not know that the individual is unique precisely because we can follow him or her across situations, and precisely because he or she acts in a familiar, distinctively recognizable pattern even as circumstances change? Let us disentangle what is valid from what is misleading in this statement. The argument assumes a hypothetical fact, that individuals are constant even as situations change; to what extent this is true remains to be shown. We are prone to accept it, without further examination, as “something everybody knows,” because it is drummed into us as a moral principle: everyone is unique, be yourself, don’t give in to social pressure, to your own self be true—these are slogans trumpeted by every mouthpiece from preachers’ homilies to advertising campaigns, echoing everywhere from popular culture to the avant-garde marching orders of modernist and hypermodernist artists and intellectuals. As sociologists, our task is not to go with the flow of taken-for-granted belief—(although doing just this is what makes a successful popular writer)—but to view it in a sociological light, to see what social circumstances created this moral belief and this hegemony of social categories at this particular historical juncture. The problem, in Goffman’s terms, is to discover the social sources of the cult of the individual.

Having said this, I am going to agree that under contemporary social conditions, very like most individuals are unique. But this is not the result of enduring individual essences. The uniqueness of the individual is something that we can derive from the theory of IR chains. Individuals are unique to just the extent that their pathways through interactional chains—their mix of situations across time, differ from other persons’ pathways. If we reify the individual, we have an ideology, a secular version of the Christian doctrine of the eternal soul, but we cut off the possibility of explaining how individual uniquenesses are molded in a chain of encounters across time.

In a strong sense, the individual is the interaction ritual chain. The individual is the precipitate of past interactional situations and an ingredient of each new situation. A precipitate, not the determinant, because a situation is an emergent property. A situation is not merely the result of the individual who comes into it, nor even of a combination of individuals (although it is that, too). Situations have laws or processes of their own; and this is what IR theory is about.

Goffman concluded: “not men and their moments, but moments and their men.” In gender-neutral language: not individuals and their interactions, but interactions and their individuals; not persons and their passions, but passions and their persons. “Every dog will have its day” is more accurately “every day will have its dog.” Incidents shape their incumbents, however momentary they may be; encounters make their encountees. It is games that make sports heroes, politics that makes politicians into charismatic leaders, although the entire weight of record-keeping, news-story-writing, award-giving, speech-making, and advertising hype goes against understanding how this comes about. To see the common realities of everyday life sociologically requires a gestalt shift, a reversal of perspectives. Breaking such deeply ingrained conventional frames is not easy to do; but the more we can discipline ourselves to think everything through the sociology of the situation, the more we will understand why w

do what we do.

Let us advance to a more subtle source of confusion. Am I proclaiming, on the micro-level, the primacy of structure over agency? Is the structure of the interaction all-determining, bringing to naught the possibility of active agency? Not at all. The agency / structure rhetoric is a conceptual morass, entangling several distinctions and modes of rhetorical force. Agency / structure confuses the distinction of micro / macro, which is the local here-and-now vis-à-vis the interconnections among local situations into a larger swath of time and space, with the distinction between what is active and what is not. The latter distinction leads us to question about energy and action; but energy and action are always local, always processes of real human beings doing something in a situation. It is also true that the action of one locality can spill over into another, that one situation can be carried over into other situations elsewhere. The extent of that spillover is part of what we mean by macro-patterns. It is acceptable, as a way of speaking, to refer to the action of a mass of investors in creating a run on the stock market, or of the breakdown of an army's logistics in setting off a revolutionary crisis, but this is a shorthand for the observable realities (i.e., what would be witnessed by a micro-sociologist on the spot). This way of speaking makes it seem as if there is agency on the macro-level, but that is inaccurate, because we are taken in by a figure of speech. Agency, we are going to use that term, is always micro; structure concatenates it into macro.

But although the terms "micro" and "agency" can be lined up at one pole, they are not identical. There is structure at every level. Micro-situations are structures, that is to say, relationships among parts. Local encounters, micro-situations, have both agency and structure. The error to avoid is identifying agency with the individual, even on the micro-level. I have just argued that we will get much further if we avoid reifying the individual, that we should see individuals as transient fluxes charged up by situations. Agency, which I would prefer to describe as the energy appearing in human bodies and emotions and as the intensity and focus of human consciousness, arises in interactions in local, face-to-face situations, or as precipitates of chains of situations. Yes, human individuals also sometimes act when they are alone, although they generally do so because their minds and bodies are charged with results of past situational encounters, and their solitary action is social insofar as it aims at and comes from communicating with other persons and thus is situated by where it falls in an IR chain.

On the balance, I am not much in favor of the terminology of "agency" and "structure." "Micro" and "macro" are sufficient for us to chart the continuum from local to inter-local connections. The energizing and the relational aspects of interactions, however, are tightly connected. Perhaps the best we might say is that the local structure of interaction is what generates and shapes the energy of the situation. That energy can leave traces, carrying over to further situations because individuals bodily resonate with emotions, which trail off over time but may linger long enough to charge up a subsequent encounter, bringing yet further chains of consequences. Another drawback of the term "agency" is that it carries the rhetorical burden of connoting moral responsibility; it brings us back to the glorification (and condemnation) of the individual, just the moralizing gestalt that we need to break out from. We are to advance an explanatory microsociology. We need to see this from a different angle. Instead of agency, I will devote theoretical attention to emotions and emotional energy, to changing intensities heated up or cooled down by the pressure-cooker of interaction ritual.

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