Goffman’s concept of the normal as the collective representation of social life

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Abstract
With many contemporary societies aspiring to normalcy, we are reminded about the taken-for-granted value of normal life. The new popularity of the concept of normality demands a rethinking of the usefulness of the idea. In this paper I suggest we rethink the issue of normalcy by analysing Goffman’s contribution to our understanding of how normal order is constructed and sustained. Goffman’s concept of normality comes close to the notion of trust as a protective mechanism which prevents chaos and disorder by providing us with a degree of cognitive familiarity. He suggests that even though normalcy is an imaginary construct, the appearance of normality counts for more than the actual occurrence. Goffman also argues that such a construction of normality is inevitable, and that the role of sociology should be to recognise it as a collective imaginary, rather than attempting to cover up its seeming artifice. He asserts that when social normalcy is seen to be threatened, the rules governing social interaction are eroded.
The paper argues that the concept of normality can set up productive new grounds for the interchange between practices and their meanings and can help us to make sociology more relevant.

With many contemporary societies aspiring to normalcy, we are reminded about the taken-for-granted value of normal life. The new popularity of the concept of normality demands a rethinking of the usefulness of the idea. In this paper I suggest we rethink the issue of normalcy by analysing Goffman’s contribution to our understanding of how normal order is constructed and sustained. Goffman suggests that even though normalcy is an imaginary construct, the appearance of normality counts for more than the actual occurrence. He also argues that such a construction of normality is inevitable, and that the role of sociology should be to recognise it as a collective imaginary, rather than attempting to cover up its seeming artifice. Goffman is explicitly concerned with the idea that when social normalcy is seen to be threatened, the rules governing social interaction are eroded. He also
Goffman’s concept of the normal conditions for normal self and normal interaction. Goffman’s ability to capture both the fragility and the relative stability of the social order presents a way of discussing the methods people employ to organise their experiences into meaningful activities and to settle on a clear definition of reality.

Normality, as the collective representation of what we imagine we ought to be or do, is possible because of the orderliness of interactional activities, which is in turn predicated ‘on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints’ (Goffman 1983:5). An awareness of the complexity and delicacy involved in the individual’s obligation to maintain spontaneous involvement in interactions, leads Goffman to argue that rules of conduct sustaining the orderliness of interaction are ‘mixed motive games’, and that people support the picture of orderly exchange ‘for a wide variety of reasons’ (Goffman 1983:5). However, due to the ceremonial order in which interactions are embedded, the individual takes ‘on a burden of ritual value and social function’ by maintaining proper involvement and ensuring that others will maintain theirs (Goffman 1967:115-16). Yet, despite the fact that our activity is largely concerned with moral matters, we, as performers, need to be a more strategic. Due to the fact that moral standards are so numerous and pervasive, we require to deal ‘with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realised’ (Goffman 1959:243). Thus, the product of interaction, a shared definition of the situation, relies both on a repertoire of normative lines as well as a set of strategies enabling individuals to live up to their group expectations. The final result, namely the confirmed normalcy of the actual, results from the combination of three strategies: drama, ritual and game (Branaman 1997).

By making themselves readable for others in such a way as to make their own concerns and feelings maximally usable by the others as a source of appropriate involvement, people sustain the sanity underlying social interaction. Face saving mechanisms help people to build bridges to each other, and therefore, Goffman argues, the study of face saving is tantamount to studying the traffic rules of social interaction or codes of people’s behaviour. Drawing on the similarities between traffic rules and grammar, he notes that only by studying the conditions in which codes are abandoned we can discover how the normal order is constructed.

In Stigma and Asylums Goffman develops Durkheim’s understanding of the normal through the abnormal, and he views normality as a collective representation sustained by interactional rituals. The normal conduct is viewed as requiring people to learn practical and tacit knowledge which enables them to understand the meaning of actions within particular contexts and to demonstrate situationally appropriate behaviour. Acting normally, achieved by
collective image of what is normal manner of conduct, and in turn the self-respect of individuals.

In *Stigma* Goffman shows how important the consistency and predictability of performance are, and he suggests that homogeneity of performance is secured by a certain bureaucratization of the spirit. The notion of ‘a normal person’, a category which we all, regardless of our resources and status, employ when thinking about ourselves, ‘may have its source in the medical approach to humanity or in the tendency of large scale bureaucratic organizations such as the nation state, to treat all members in some respects as equal’ (Goffman 1963:7). Being a ‘normal person’ - a human being like anyone one else - means incorporating standards from wider society and meeting others’ exceptions about what we ought to be.

Whatever the model’s origin, *the normals* are ‘those who do not depart negatively from the particular expectations at issue’ (Goffman 1963:5), whereas abnormal persons are those individuals who are deprived of the claims and the institutional supports to normal identity, which are taken for granted by the majority of others.

Without treading on the ground reserved for normals, stigmatized persons ought to follow societal rules for ‘good adjustment’, which results in the conditional acceptance of the stigmatized and secures for normals the luxury of not having to admit ‘to themselves how limited their tactfulness and tolerance is’ (1963:121).

In other words:

‘A phantom acceptance is thus allowed to provide the base for a phantom normalcy’, the maintenance of which is good for individuals, ‘but even better for society’ (ibid:122).

People’s freedom to choose the self is also limited by their assets and status as they rely on access to structural resources and the possession of traits labelled as desirable by the dominant culture in order to sustain a respectable self-image in the eyes of others. The impact of the universal standards of normalcy and the importance of stigma management as a general feature of society become clear, if we consider Goffman’s third category of stigma, that is, ‘the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion’ (1963:4). The category of tribal stigma (other stigmas being abominations of the body, and blemishes of individual character) refers to the dominant and powerful set of standards stemming from the mainstream cultural image of a ‘normal American’, which shapes people’s general standards of social conduct.

Goffman’s description of the process of ‘passing for normals’ as an application of impression management focuses our attention rather more on singular episodes than on normalcy as a continuously-occurring process. However, if we expand his notion of a total institution to cover the whole of society, and if we broaden his category of tribal stigma so that it includes all of us, we can re-read *Stigma* as a description of the ongoing process of
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script. Managing of stigma reveals how highly complicated and unsecured the continuous process of displaying our competencies as normals is. It is society which establishes the catalogue of normal and abnormal attributes and we apply these categories unconsciously. Bearing in mind that all members of society have stigmas of their own and that they all try to put on faultless performances before their audience, the stigma game can be seen a collective effort to sustain the image of normality by following the rules of interactional order.

In Asylums Goffman offers an account of a total institution, where all aspects of life are conducted under a single authority and are planned to fulfil normal aims of the organization. Such organizations impose a single, universal system of evaluation, so that individuals who do not meet the standards are discredited as being of inferior status. A total adjustment makes organisations’ members ‘normal’. A ‘normal’ or ‘institutionalised’ inmate ‘gives and gets in an appropriate spirit what has been systematically planned for, whether this entails much or little of himself’ (Goffman 1961:189). Conformity and an acceptance of the institution rules and standards result in the patient being recognised as a ‘normal member’. The self is a public reality, ‘not a property of the person’, and it resides ‘in the institutional arrangement’ which ‘does not so much support the self as constitute it’ (Goffman 1961: 168). Total institutions aim to constitute the criteria of normalcy for all their members.

Goffman’s discussion of the ways in which organizations control their members’ self-conception and behaviour, as well as ways in which people’s conformity contributes to construction of image of normality resembles Foucault’s treatment of normalization as the characteristic means of exerting power in modern society. Burns (1992:145) claims that Goffman’s argument that practices of total institutions are ‘unexceptionable, even ‘normal’ points to the same issues ‘to which his contemporary, Michel Foucault, gave central importance’. Not only are both writers interested in total institutions, such as prisons and asylums, they also insist that power relations always involve the possibility of resistance. Goffman and Foucault similarly analyse the pressure exerted by total institutions by focusing on dissidence and the way it is dealt with. In addition, both of them observe the experience of power as a ‘hegemony designed for “normalisation”’ (Burns 1992: ibid).

In Foucault’s approach, the manufacture of normality is contingent upon both the internalising of normative codes of behaviour, as well as on external control to sustain the normalcy, social order relies on two mechanisms: conformity and control. Goffman also considers these two mechanisms to play an important role in the securing social order. Whereas from Foucault’s
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as the norm for everybody to internalise, in Goffman’s version people are seen as are manipulative ‘merchants of morality’(1967:115) who conform to the norm for different reasons. They are perceived as having more instrumental inclinations, and as capable of skilful manipulation of rules and appearances in order to put on a show of normalcy. It means that Goffman not only defines abnormal individuals as offenders of the traffic of interactions, but that he also considers social order to not necessarily be founded on the internalization of norms. For Goffman, the orderliness of co-present interaction is ensured because people have a tendency to expect and maintain a reciprocity of perspectives that sustains their relationships.

The normalizing power of social interactions, with the support of the normalizing agency of social control as well as the institutions of power and authority, constructs ‘the micro-reality upon which macro-structures are based’ (Collins 1988:61). Social interaction, as a social institution, controls and imposes norms, but it also enables and mediates the operations of all the other institutions in society. It can be said therefore that the rules of social interaction are ‘the greatest support of the normalizing power’, to paraphrase Foucault.

Goffman also examines the conditions necessary for the emergence of rebellious behaviour. We all need societal guidelines to direct our actions and to secure order, yet only by resisting these guidelines, at least to some degree, can we gain self identity. People must have some outlet to express themselves as individuals and, although conformity creates stability, rebellion is necessary for the creation of individuality. Goffman’s insistence on the importance of a balance between identification with, and opposition to society, combined with the concept of the self as a stance-taking entity, enables him to introduce a new perspective on the issue of normalcy.

When patients reject the institution’s assumptions about their identity, they employ - in order to reduce their doubts about their identities - various techniques of ‘making out’, thanks to which their lives become more tolerable. They simultaneously affirm at least to themselves that ‘they are more than institution takes them to be’(Manning 1992: 111). So even in total institutions there is the possibility of some autonomy and a margin of freedom, and since people always oscillate between conformity and rebellion, anti-official subcultures emerge. The practice of reserving ‘something of oneself from the clutch of an institution’(Goffman 1961:319), as an essential constituent of the self and underlife, highlights the importance of the dialectic of identification and distancing, commitment and attachment. The collective imagery of what is normal social life thus refers to social relationships organised around the achievement of self-respect and is structured by conformity and rebellion. It is possible to see not only how the interaction
but also how the image of normality is dependent on the structure of social life, which delimits an individual’s freedom and resources to present and defend the self-claims.

In a world in which the rules governing social intercourse have been significantly eroded, people oscillate between being off guard and being on guard and they are likely ‘to exude signs of calmness and ease’ only when they sense ‘that things are normal’ (Goffman 1971:317). In contrast, normal appearances, as peaceful and safe environments in which we are sure that things are what they seem and that there is nothing or nobody there which is threatening, help to save energy by allowing routine conduct and averting threats to individual self respect. Normal appearances assure people that nothing around them is out of the ordinary, and so in the absence of anything unusual, they can continue their routines. In such situations individuals ‘will sense that appearances are “natural” or “normal”’ and thus they feel safe enough to carry out with their affairs’ (Goffman 1971:317).

Coping with the world around us requires a specific competence which the majority of us gain from experiences and through the learning process. Generally, risk factors in our immediate environment are low, and there is no cause for alarm, normal appearances do not require conscious awareness. However, in dangerous conditions, when there is a high level of risk - we are all aware of the need to act our way out of the threat. Consequently, as we search for signs of danger, while concealing our suspicions by acting ‘normally’. Therefore, ‘acting normally’ sometime requires self-conscious effort. Viewed in this light, normality is manufactured or constructed by people in the same surroundings as they come to terms with the level of danger therein. In short, normality is ‘an artefact, created by those cohabiting within the same physical setting’ (Burns 1992:95).

The individual’s belief that the situation is normal helps that person feels comfortable enough to form a trusting intention toward the other party. A belief in situational normality means that the people involved will act normally and can therefore be trusted. It can be argued that trust resides in actors’ expectations of ‘thing as usual’, with the actor being ‘able to take for granted, to take under trust, a vast array of features of the social order’ (Garfinkel 1967:173).

The desire to organise our experiences into meaningful activities results in framing: a device by which we give a strip of activity a certain reality status. The reality and sincerity of everyday frames is protected by the use of various procedures that anchor frame activity. Among many devices used to make us believe that what appears to be real is real, the material world is the ultimate grounding (Goffman 1974:247). Therefore we anchor ourselves to
life as a predictable and routine cycle of events’, which can be seen as ‘the testimony to the heaviness of these anchors’ (Manning 1992: 127).

The multiple nature of realities is the result of the way frames are built upon each other. Primary frameworks, seen as prior or ‘original’ interpretations and which refer to people’s natural and social worlds, are located at the beginning of the process of reframing. Since people continuously project their frames of reference onto world and since they continuously layer frames, social reality becomes very complex, yet it still feels ‘natural’ and ‘normal’. This sense of normality of the multidimensional reality is ensured by people’s capacity of coping easily with the multiple of frames and their transformations. People are not only skilful in dealing with these complexities as a matter of ordinary common-sense, but they also build their frames in such a natural way so that ‘one fails to see their so doing only because events ordinarily confirm these projections, causing the assumptions to disappear into the smooth flow of activity’ (Goffman 1974: 39). Thus, as a result of this ‘fit’ between our frameworks and the actual occurrences, we are convinced that the activity is what was expected and so the definition of the event is confirmed. Such a construction of the social world ensures our conventional conduct, which - in turn - is understandable only in terms of the frame.

Although Goffman assumes that everyday activity provides an original model of something that is actual, he is aware of the importance of cultural standards as the established sources of representations, which shape our conduct and role performances. Since what people imagine as normal, or what they expect to be normal, is always already framed as the ‘real’, Goffman argues that the reality against which we impute unreality is itself a construction. Thus, to act normally or be ‘natural’ is not merely to seem at ease, ‘but to be acting in such a way as to convince others that the apparent frame is in fact the actual one’ (1974:487). Normality, therefore, is about frames, and it is only in terms of frames that one can make sense of the concern shown in regard to them.

Whilst Goffman argues for the functional necessity of normalcy, he also emphasises the multidimensional and layered nature of reality. He maintains that people, as a matter of ordinary common-sense, deal with complex and multiple realities, and he sees such conducts as vital to the confirmation of the normalcy of a given situation. Goffman’s main interest is in analyzing the organization of experience rather than the organization of society, nonetheless he discovers surprisingly universal social mechanisms responsible for the construction of interactional order.

Goffman’s conceptualizations of normality are underpinned by the assumption that normality can be only understood in the context of the interaction order
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Normality, like social order, is a collective achievement to which we all contribute by following the rules of daily life. It is a sense or feeling that order is natural which allows us to accept the fiction of order because this acceptance makes order function. Goffman’s concept of normality comes close to the notion of trust as a protective mechanism which prevents chaos and disorder by providing us with a degree of cognitive familiarity. Goffman manages to capture both sides of normalizing power: its responsibility for the continuation of social structures, and its contribution to the creation of opportunities for trust relationships.

References


