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Goffman in 'the home': Exploring the viability of a Goffmanian style analysis of the nanny and parent relationship

Abstract: Is a 'Goffmanian style' ethnographic analysis desirable, viable or ethical in contemporary settings – particularly within intimate environments such as 'the home'? This paper unmasks Erving Goffman's methodological secrets, exploring the viability of these methods for the contemporary researcher. His methodology is explored within the context of my upcoming study of the nanny and parent relationship within 'the home' setting – a particularly delicate and fragile relationship that occurs within the most private and intimate of settings. The paper explores other examples of ethnographies in 'the home', that use more contemporary versions of ethnographic methods, and I discuss the viability of using interviews as a preferred methodology for research in 'the home'. The paper maintains that Erving Goffman's ethnographic approach and style produced compelling insights in the 1950s, but is inappropriate to contemporary research contexts for a range of ethical and practical reasons.

Key words: Goffman, Ethnography, Methodology, Nanny, Parent, Home.

Erving Goffman is one of the most widely read sociologists (Ditton 1980: 1, Scheff 2006: 2). His work offers keen insights into the “microworld of social interaction”; insights that are uniquely interesting to a wide variety of social scientists, as well as members of the general public (Ditton 1980: 1; Scheff 2006: 2). One of Goffman's most important contributions are his theories on the 'presentation of the self in everyday life' (Goffman 1959). Goffman's theatrical metaphors of – 'front stage' and 'back stage' – and his theory of social interactions as analogous to 'performances' - create useful tools for describing contemporary social worlds, in both employment and home contexts. However, his unique ethnographic methodology creates challenges and a multitude of potential problems for the modern researcher.

According to Goffman (1989:127) 'Every world provides substance for [its]... people, provides a life... the way to get it, is to need it. And the only way to need it, is to not
have anything of your own'. He firmly believed that the best kind of research was based on ethnographic methods, such as participant observation. He argued that researchers should cut their lives 'to the bone', separate themselves from the world they know, and embrace the new world of their participants (Goffman 1989: 127).

In this paper, I discuss Goffman's version of ethnographic methodology, and consider its implications for studying an environment in which 'the home' and the workplace intersect: the nanny and parent relationship. I investigate Goffman's methodology and ideas, exploring the benefits, challenges and potentially harmful consequences of this type of study, and the practicalities of doing so in an environment where public and private merge – the nanny's public workspace is the parent’s private home. I also outline some examples of ethnographies that have been carried out in 'the home', before discussing whether an alternative methodology – interviews – might be more appropriate for a contemporary study of nanny-parent relationships, and the extent to which it could still be considered to fulfil the benefits of Goffman's ethnographic style.

**Goffman's 'methodological secrets'**

Erving Goffman rarely openly disclosed his methods of inquiry and seldom dedicated more than a few lines to methodology in his texts (Manning 1992:142). Fortunately, he outlined one of his central methodological approaches (participant observation), at the 1974 'Pacific Sociological Association Meeting'. His discussion was secretly taped, and later published (Goffman 1989). In this discussion, Goffman suggested that ethnographic methods, such as – participant observation – are the most advantageous way to fully understand the lives of participants. He argued that this kind of research
allows observation of the 'minor grunts and groans' of the participants, as they respond and react to events in their daily lives (Goffman 1989: 125-126). He emphasized how ethnographic methods allow the researcher to witness the activities as they unfold, rather than simply listening to a story being told after the fact (Goffman 1989: 126). For Goffman, immersion in the everyday experiences – and life circumstances, of the people being studied, is necessary in order to develop an understanding and empathy for the community (Goffman 1989: 125). Furthermore, it is essential to take on a realistic role in that community: complete with costume, hair style, and a willingness to learn the daily tasks and practices essential for an accurate portrayal as a member of the research setting (Goffman 1989: 128). The researcher needs to pretend that the participants' world is their world; a world from which they should pretend that they can-not depart (Goffman 1989: 128-129).

While emphasizing participant observation, Goffman also used a variety of other, complimentary methods of inquiry, including the use of 'metaphors' and of 'unsystematic observation', and using material from a variety of sources including newspapers, autobiographies, letters, novels and case histories (Manning 1992: 142; Wallace& Wolf 1995: 220). The most unusual of these methods was the use of metaphor as a direct method of inquiry (Manning 1992: 143). Goffman used metaphors as 'conceptual models' and 'preliminary ordering devices', rather than simple words (Manning 1992: 143-144). These 'conceptual models' allowed him to use the knowledge gained from specific settings to develop insights into similar communities (Manning 1992: 144). Metaphors transformed the familiar, 'taken for granted' aspects of everyday life into problematic concepts and a new way of viewing the world (Lofland 1980: 27; Manning 1992: 146).
Goffman also used unsystematic, naturalistic observation, allowing him the flexibility to observe situations as they arose in a variety of settings – within a chosen community (Manning 1992: 148). This allowed him to select observations based on relevance; that is, Goffman could choose to observe aspects of daily life and interaction that were most useful and relevant to his research at that time (Manning 1992: 148).

**Ethnography – the desirable choice?**

Goffman is not alone in privileging ethnography, and numerous books have been written about the great number of benefits gained from using an ethnographic methodology. The argument is that – this kind of research allows the researcher to understand and explore the social reality of a culture, from the participants' perspective, within the natural environment (Hammersley & Atkinson 1983: 2; Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006: 234; Goffman 1961: ix-x). Ethnographers are able to learn about the 'invisible' everyday practices of people within private communities practices that are hidden from a 'stranger' researcher embarking on interviews or questionnaires (Buscatto 2007: 47). Thus, in studying the nanny and parent relationship within 'the home', ethnography has the potential to uncover the ‘real’ everyday experiences of nannies and parents, in their ‘natural environment’. ‘Actual' events and conversations can be witnessed, as can the unspoken rules and expectations within the relationships.

Ethnographic research also allows the researcher to experience the physical environment of the participants: the visual features of the space, such as participants' dress and the architectural design of the space, and the sounds and smells of the environment (Atkinson 2005: 8- 10; Buscatto 2007: 55).
Finally, ethnographic research has the potential to expose, explore and allow empathetic understanding of ‘invisible populations’; people whose voices are rarely heard, due to such factors as socio-economic status or race (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2006: 232; Goldthorpe 2007: 63), or the invisibility that arises from working in a private home environment, as is the case with nannies and parents.

**Other ethnographies in 'the home'**

There have been some precedents for ethnographic methods used to research populations in a home environment. For example, Fishman (1990) explored the intimate relationships of three couples within the home environment. She examined the power dynamics that occurred in the couples' interactions and conversations over a period of several days (observation times varied from four to fourteen days) (Fishman 1990: 227). Fishman (1990) assumed the role of 'complete observer', taking a peripheral role as ethnographer. She used a tape recorder to record the couples' everyday conversations in their homes.

Roy & Burton (2007) studied a group of women and children from low income families in their home environment. This study explored the issue of paternal involvement in the everyday lives of the families. This mammoth study employed 210 ethnographers to observe 256 families in three different cities (Roy & Burton 2007: 27). Ethnographers maintained contact with each family for twelve to eighteen months (on average), and met with each family once or twice a month, after which a follow up interview was carried out at six months and one year (Roy & Burton 2007: 28). During meetings, ethnographers carried out 'participant observation' and 'in depth'
interviews with mothers on specified topics relating to their every-day lives (Roy & Burton 2007: 27-28).

Rollins (1985) also became a 'complete participant' in the home environment – for her study of domestic workers. She worked 'undercover' as a domestic worker for a period of six months to explore first hand the experiences of women in that role, and the relationships between workers and employers (Rollins 1985: 9).

**Ethnography – Goffmanian style?**

It is important to note that although each of the above examples use ethnographic methods, they do not adhere to a 'Goffmanian style' of ethnography. Fishman's (1990) peripheral role as a 'complete observer', basing her research on tape recorded conversations, fails Goffman’s requirement that the researcher participate within the community, witnessing and experiencing interactions and occurrences as they happen (Goffman 1989: 126). Instead, Fishman (1990) experiences the participants' worlds through voices and sound, listening to interactions that occurred in the past.

Roy and Burton's (2007) in-depth interviews and intermittent, fleeting visits in the field, would also be insufficient to meet Goffman's standards. Goffman (1989: 130) believed that the best way to understand the world of the participants was to become a member of the community for at least one year. Rather than immersion, Roy and Burton's (2007) method creates a 'visitor' role for the researcher; the researcher visits the field intermittently, rather than living and breathing the participants' everyday existence.
Rollins’ (1985) methodology adheres most closely to Goffman's style of ethnography. Rollins submits herself fully to the experiences of her chosen community – the domestic worker. However, Goffman would not have approved of her relatively short stay in the field – preferring that she stayed at least one year (Goffman 1989: 130).

**Goffman's methodology and contemporary constraints:**

Is Goffman's ethnographic approach too extreme for contemporary researchers, and inappropriate for modern field settings? It is true that contemporary researchers have to comply with stricter ethical codes and procedures, with greater surveillance and institutional control, than did Goffman in the 1950s and 1960s; codes which restrict the researcher in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants (Johnson 2008: 224; Mauthner et al 2002: 1; Liampoutong & Ezzy 2005: 42).

In Australia, the ‘Statement on Human Experimentation' (based on the Declaration of Helsinki) was created in 1966, outlining the expected ethical conduct of the researcher (Habibis 2006: 59). However, the application of these ethical considerations was at the discretion of the individual researcher until 1973; no external ethics approval was required prior to this time (Habibis 2006: 59). Contemporary researchers are now monitored by external bodies, such as the Human Research Ethics Committees (Australia), the Institutional Review Boards (America) or equivalent bodies in other countries. These committees ensure that researchers uphold the rights of participants, and adhere to the “four ethical principles of respect for: autonomy (informed consent), non-maleficence (do no harm), beneficence (benefits of research outweigh risks), and justice (research strategies and procedures are fair and just)” (Robertson 2000: 532). Contemporary researchers are expected to consistently and diligently assess ethical
considerations throughout their research; maintaining a 'heightened ethical awareness' to ensure that participants' are valued, protected and respected as human beings (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007: 11, 13). As such, researchers are expected to fully disclose the nature their research, and to seek permission from the participants by gaining voluntary 'informed consent' before embarking on research (NHMRC 2007:19, 23). Participants must also have access to any benefit that may have resulted from the research at the conclusion of the research (NHMRC 2007: 12).

Goffman's approach included covert observation – a highly contested and debated methodology by contemporary scholars – which is generally discouraged for its violation of the 'informed consent' rule, the potential to betray trust or to influence the behavior of participants (Habibis 2006: 77). Contemporary researchers must also be self-consciously aware of the potential risks – “harm, discomfort or inconvenience” – within their research, in order to minimise the impact on participants (NHMRC 2007: 13-17). Furthermore, they are expected to assess what is 'fair' and just; and to ensure that the participants' welfare and interests are taken into consideration, whilst reflecting on the cultural and social implications of the research (NHMRC 2007: 11). In contrast, Goffman's methodology seemed to be far more concerned with gaining insights into the world of the participants – witnessing their experiences first hand, in order to create insightful and intriguing work – than maintaining a fair and ethically sustainable framework of research.

Finally, contemporary research needs to be deemed 'ethically acceptable' by the review bodies (NHMRC 2007: 13-17). It must be beneficially justifiable; that is, it must make a contribution to social welfare; to “knowledge or understanding” or to
improve the “skill or expertise of researchers” (NHMRC 2007: 12). Contemporary research funding is increasingly directed towards projects which are ‘visibly socially useful’, rather than purely ‘arbitrary knowledge’ (Habibis 2006: 75). Goffman's work would almost certainly err on the side of 'arbitrary knowledge’, which would have limited his funding possibilities and potentially his receipt of ethics committee approval in a contemporary setting.

Johnson (2008) and Lincoln & Tierney (2004) suggest that it is becoming increasingly difficult to get permission to carry out, or gain funding for qualitative research in the contemporary setting. Johnson (2008: 225-227) suggests that there is a growing conservative movement towards limiting the kinds of research that can be carried out in academic circles; predominantly encouraging quantitative – over qualitative research. This is driven by concerns for the anonymity and privacy of participants, protecting institutions from litigation, and a concern over the 'scientific merits' of qualitative research (Johnson 2008: 212, 228; Lincoln & Tierney, 2004: 220-222).

Research today is situated within an environment where ethical decisions are not black and white; they are many shades of grey (Alvarez 2000:1262). This is further compounded when participants' private lives are put on display in the public arena (Birch et al 2002: 1). Goffman's ethnographic work produced compelling insights in the 1950s – a time when individual researchers dictated their own ethical boundaries. However, if his work were to take place in a contemporary setting, his methods would most likely be considered 'ethically unacceptable' by a modern ethics committee. Goffman's methodology is fraught with practical challenges and ethical dilemmas for the modern researcher. This becomes particularly clear when thinking about research
in the home environment, such as research on nanny-parent relationships within the home.

**Ethical challenges for Goffmanian ethnography in the home**

The nanny, parent and child arrangement is a complex and emotional relationship (Gregson & Lowe 1994: 192; Meagher 1999: 19). A 'goffmanesque' researcher observing within the home would almost certainly affect this delicate and fragile balance. The researcher may inadvertently cause potentially harmful or negative consequences for the family or nanny (Tisdale 2004: 14). The research is likely to reveal the taboo and unspoken topics within the relationship, which may create friction and tension once 'out in the open'. Participants may confide personal, private information to the researcher. Fetterman (1989: 133) suggests that 'people often accord ethnographers the same level of trust they give to priests, rabbis (and) psychiatrists'. Kornblum (1996: 6) suggests that researchers often grapple with remaining truthful, objective and unemotional, whilst describing the world that was witnessed.

Such research would also involve young children; children that are potentially too immature to understand the role of the researcher in the setting. The researcher's presence may create tension or unease for the children. Alternatively, the children may bond with the researcher, creating a relationship with her, resulting in a difficult departure on completion of the research. Bailey (1996: 60) and Hesse- Biber & Leavy (2006: 245) suggest that it is often difficult for the researcher to maintain emotional distance from the participants: 'The life of the field researcher and the lives of those in the setting come together and come apart - not fully merging, but not fully
independent’ (Bailey 1996: 60).

**Sampling challenges for Goffmanian ethnography in the home**

Research on nanny-parent interactions in the home also faces contemporary challenges that were not part of Goffman’s considerations. For example, my own proposed research needs to be carried out by a single researcher within a finite and limited period of time. In part this is the result of my own personal circumstances, which appear to create insurmountable hurdles for a Goffmanian style ethnography, reflecting a shift in both research contexts and in the gendered and other identities of researchers. Unlike Goffman, I am a part-time (PhD) student, and mother of a small child. I am therefore less able to immerse myself fully in the everyday lives of the participants – to cut my 'life to the bone' or to spend continuous time in the world of 'the home'. Such a strategy would be impractical, and have potentially unethical consequences not only for the participants, but also for my family and small son. Yet this is not the only problem. New demands of efficiency mean that the research must be carried out within a limited time frame in order to satisfy the requirements of a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). Dedicating an entire year in the field is challenging in this delimited context. These two factors dictate that only a small number of participants can be studied, which in turn threatens the privacy and anonymity of the participants.

I may also experience problems with access, with the 'formal gatekeepers' (Bailey1996: 50). Parents/ employers are the 'formal gatekeepers' in 'the home'. Their permission is essential in order to gain access to the setting. However, permission may not be granted for a number of reasons. Firstly, parents may not be present (for
the most part) during the observation period. This is because they hire the nanny, so that they can go out of the research setting ('the home') to work. It is likely that parents will be protective of their children, and their family's privacy. They may be reluctant to have their nanny and children participate in a study that they can not personally supervise and witness. Furthermore, parents may be aware of the delicate, emotional balance that exists within their relationship with their nanny, and may show reluctance to embark on anything that may upset this highly important relationship.

Furthermore, every family and nanny arrangement is different. These arrangements are specifically tailored to meet the needs of the family (and occasionally the needs of the Nanny). Other factors, such as living arrangements and job description also affect the nature of the arrangement (Gregson & Lowe 1994: 169). There are so many varying experiences and expectations within this community. A small sample of two or three representative homes would be an insufficient representation of the nanny/parent relationship. Any assumptions or observations about the way nannies, parents and children relate would only refer only to the specific families that were observed. Goldthorpe (2007: 72) suggests that representativeness is often a problem for ethnographies, sometimes creating an overly partial view of the society that is studied.

**Interviews: An alternative methodology?**

Although the 'interview' methodology does not adhere to the Goffmanian ethnographic style, it potentially offers the contemporary researcher many benefits and provides a means of overcoming many of the problems described above. For example, the research could be carried out during time convenient to both the researcher and the participants, within the defined research period. The researcher
could achieve a greater degree of representativeness by interviewing a much larger sample of participants than is possible in an ethnography. The 'formal gatekeepers' (parents) are more likely to give their permission to participate within a more controlled environment. Furthermore, children do not need to be involved in the interviewing process, limiting the potential for emotional distress caused by the researcher.

Another alternative is to carry out an interview methodology, supplemented with small scale ethnographic research, thus gaining the benefits that both methodologies have to offer, and limiting the potentially harmful consequences by creating boundaries for participant observations – such as, regular, pre-organised observations for only a few hours at a time, rather than ongoing daily observations.

**Conclusion**

Erving Goffman was dedicated to the ethnographic methodology. He maintained that research based on observation (unsystematic or participant) was imperative for understanding a culture and its people. He believed that researchers should immerse themselves in the world they are studying; to witness events, rather than listen to the stories of the participants. Ethnography offers the researcher a way to understand and empathise with participants. It allows the researcher to experience the natural environment – the sights, smells and sounds of the place. Ethnographers can access 'invisible populations' and private everyday practices. Thus, ethnography offers a great many benefits for a study of nannies, parents and children in 'the home' environment.
However, a 'Goffmanian style' ethnographic methodology creates challenges for contemporary researchers, and has potentially detrimental implications for the participants. His methodology has become virtually impossible to replicate within contemporary conditions, and undesirable for ethical and practical reasons. Contemporary researchers are faced with far more rigorous ethical scrutiny and practical obligations than was the case in the 1950s. More limited time for completing research and producing outputs also impacts upon the possible sample size, which in turn affects representativeness, and thus the privacy of parents, nannies and children. Participant observation may also negatively impact what is already a complex and emotionally charged relationship. Furthermore, the 'formal gatekeepers' (parents) may be reluctant to agree to ethnographic research in their home.

Research based on an 'interview' methodology (or one supplemented with a limited amount of ethnographic research) eliminates many of these problems, by creating a more controlled environment. This is not to say that research based on a contemporary version of an ethnographic methodology would not be appropriate for 'the home' environment; providing the ethical and practical implications can be resolved. However, the Goffmanian approach is fraught with ethical and practical implications, which create methodological minefields for the contemporary researcher.
References


