

Between life and form: human agency and communication in the footsteps of Mead and Goffman

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Abstract

The object of the present article is to propose a new reading approach of the relationship that exists between the ideas of the social psychologist George Herbert Mead and the sociologist Erving Goffman. For such, this work attempts, first off, to present the problems in each author - the construction of *self* and the order of interaction, respectively - to, later, point out a certain complementarity between their perspectives. Finally, there are some clues as to how this revision of the sociological approach, based on the centrality of social interaction, allows us to complexify the discussion of communicative processes and human agency.

Key words:

Communication. Interaction. Human Agency. Subjects.

1 Introduction

The interaction matrix¹ is one of the most fructiferous traditions in sociological thinking to evidence the constitutive dimension of the processes of human agency in the configuration of social life, because when evidencing an interaction concept, understood here as a reciprocally referenced action, it is capable of overcoming the historic paradox individual x society, emphasizing the articulation that exists between these two terms: society is made up of individuals in coordinated action.² Shifting views towards this articulation has a fundamental implication of placing language, and, consequently, communication processes, in the forefront. As the reflexive capacity of the human being is being made explicit and understood as a symbolic system, language begins to be conceived no longer as a mere bridge between centered subjects, but as a true cement in the process of the constitution of subjects and social reality.

The North-American psychologist George Herbert Mead and the Canadian sociologist Erving

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Goffman are two of the most prominent figures of the interaction matrix. Under the specific forms of development of this perspective, Vera França (2004, 2008), enthusiastic researcher of this sociological approach in the field of Social Communication, explains:

Goffman's analysis is very different from Mead's symbolic interactionism; to the latter, interactions were seen as representative moments: the meanings were constituted in the core of these interactions, and underwent interpretation (by the interpretation filter) from the subjects. Thus, they acquired greater mobility; they were living moments, founders of social life. [...] In this sense, Goffman's analysis presents a more conservative (immobilist) trait of interactions (they are the place of reproduction, and not production, of social life), and the individuals-actors are less 'subjects' of their action. The conception of mutual construction individual-society loses itself in the analysis, and what we see is the great importance of the social aspect. (FRANÇA, 2004, p.12).

As a sequence to these considerations, the central objective of this work is to reinforce the richness of the interactional perspective in the field of Communication, such as Vera França did, but proposing an alternative interpretation to the one given by her regarding the relationship between Mead and Goffman's projects. Throughout this text we will develop the

idea that the sistematizations of these authors should not be understood as diametric manners of conceiving the nature of interaction, but, actually, relate to distinct problems regarding a same approach and, therefore, are not subject to a comparison like the one produced. While the social psychologist supplies the theoretical bases for the construction of a sociological model capable of fully understanding the articulation that exists between the notions of individual and society, the Canadian thinker, in turn, is more concerned with the study of the order of interaction. A detailed understanding of the problems that guides the formulations of each one of these theorists will also be capable of pointing out the existence of a certain complementarity between their thoughts. This fact is very important, since making this conceptual link explicit offers new elements to increase the complexity of the discussion of the theme of human agency, and also evidences the centrality of the communicative dimension in the production of social life.

2 The development of *self*

During the first days of contact with him, when he returned from his studies in Berlin forty years ago, his mind was possessed by the problem that had always worried him: the

1 The choice of the term interaction as opposed to interactionist was not accidental and refers to an attempt to emphasize the centrality of interactions in the theoretical scope of G.H. Mead and Erving Goffman, at the same time as it aims to release these authors from the chains of the Symbolic Interactionism developed by Herbert Blumer.

2 This does not mean that the idea of coordination can be equalled to that of rigidness. It is about directing attention to a certain sharing of meanings that allow the delimitation of a common world, subject to reformulations, and not a world that is equal, invariable, essential.

problem of individual conscience regarding the world and society.

**John Dewey, at Mead's funerals in 1931.
Farr, 2008**

The declaration of the pragmatist North-American philosopher John Dewey is very elucidative, since it situates in a direct manner the problematic that permeates the anxieties present in the work of George Herbert Mead, that is, the elaboration of a social theory of the psychic apparatus.

To understand the structure of Mead's ideas it is necessary to situate the historic context for their production. In this sense it is important to emphasize the fact that, at the turn of the XIXth to the XXth century, according to Robert Farr (2008), the Human Science disciplines were undergoing an institutionalization process. That said, two issues appear as elementary: the delimitation of the objects of study for each of these incipient sciences, and the statute of scientificity to be followed in the area of Psychology.

Regarding the delimitation of the objects of study, pertaining to the process of compartmentalization of knowledge that marks the first phase of scientific development, the proposal of separation between the individual and societal domains that established the academic distinction between Psychology and Sociology should be observed. In this sense, the French sociologist Émile

Durkheim attributes to Sociology the study of collective representations, while conceding to Psychology the task of being concerned with individual representations. For Durkheim, these representational levels, far from being articulated, would be guided by specific operating logics. Society, according to the French sociologist, could be expressed as a collective conscience, external and independent from individual motivations.³

The second problem is intimately related to the disputes for the definition of the possible objects in the domain of Psychology. Conscience or behavior? That is the question! What was at stake in this conflict was related to the statute of Psychology as a legitimate science, and, thus, the choice of the focus of study that would be privileged was of central importance. According to Farr's argument, to focus on the dimension of behavior was to be affiliated to the heritage and status of the development of the Natural Sciences, seen until then as a reference model in the production of science. As a counterpoint, the emphasis on the mind incurred on the risk of not conforming with the true positivist scientific, since the access to the psychic dimension was not completely guaranteed by quantifiable methods, being accessed, mainly, by means of introspection.

The development of the Meadian conceptual basis cannot be disconnected from these

³ On this issue, the French sociologist's study on suicide is emblematic. It had the objective of demonstrating the eminent social character of such practice as opposed to the popular belief that this phenomenon was the fruit of merely subjective causes. For this undertaking Durkheim researched suicide from its incidence in different societies and social groups, observing a certain regularity in the variation rates as well as a typical social significance related to the function of this practice in a given community.

issues of historical order. After this brief contextualization, it is necessary to present the theoretical traditions that contributed to Mead's intellectual undertaking.

2.1 Wundt and the elementary anxiety

G. H. Mead attended classes given by the German psychologist Wilhelm Wundt in Leipzig in the winter semester of 1888-1889, before moving to Berlin. During this period, the North-American philosopher had the opportunity of being introduced to the Psychology conceived by Wundt.⁴ In the theories in his *Völkerpsychologie*, the German thinker evidenced the importance of language in social life as a condition that enables the integration of different minds. However, as Sánchez de la Yncera (1994) reminds us, language, for Wundt, consisted in the expression of subjective emotions that, in a subsequent moment, would gain a shared objective significance. This fact placed Wundt in front of a fundamental dilemma: how does the mind create language? Due to the limitations imposed by his Cartesian way of thinking, he was not able to find a good answer for such question, since it presumed the anteriority of the mind. A more refined understanding of the problem, however, only becomes possible by criticizing the Cartesian model itself.

2.2 Another philosophy

The philosophy of René Descartes, that establishes a distinction between subject and object of knowledge, provided individuals during the beginning of modern times with the possibility of questioning and breaking away from the explanations of tradition, until then unquestionable, insofar as it preconized reason in detriment of the potential confusions that could be committed by the senses. For this, however, it “[...] abolished the self-evident and pacifically accepted existence of the world in the presence of individual conscience, of the body of the thinking self as a component of this world and of other thinking subjects in this world” (JOAS, 1999, p. 133). This fact generated an interesting problem: being the knower an isolated individual and the other merely an object of the subject, how is the existence of a society possible? The polarization of self x the other can only understand the relationship that exists between individual and society as distinct and incompatible totalities - Psychology x Sociology. Here is the importance of Hegel's philosophical legacy in Mead's ideas: it creates conditions for overcoming the Cartesian dualisms – based on alternative dichotomies or/or that establish a certain asymmetry in the value of the terms at stake – to emphasize the relationship of the terms in question, expressed by the additive

⁴ Such Psychology, even though it had the mind as an object of analysis, was not a homogenous project, being subdivided into two distinct forms: the *Physiologische Psychologie*, experimental, that was oriented towards the *Naturwissenschaften* (Natural Sciences) and dealt with the processes of individual conscience; and the *Völkerpsychologie*, social, that was directed towards the *Geisteswissenschaften* (Human Sciences) and whose object was the relationship between the mind and its cultural manifestations, that is, collective phenomena that constitute themselves from the interaction between individuals.

particle and, meaning both. Different from Descartes, Hegelian thought did not understand reality as an independent and given totality, to be deciphered by the subject using an appropriate method. Thus, the German philosopher proposes an understanding of reality as a construction operated by the subject, which reinforces the interdependence between these two instances in the epistemological process. The constitution of the self, then, occurs necessarily in relation to another self (at the same time object and subject), in a process of reciprocal constitution and creation of a common world of objects based on the centrality of the communicative dynamic, a fact that created conditions to understand the process of coordination of social life. The Hegelian philosophy,^{5,6} therefore, has a vocation that is much more social than the Cartesian.

2.3 The centrality of action

The dislocation proposed by the pragmatist philosophy reinforced the criticism of the Cartesian one insofar as it seeks to dislocate the axis of analysis from individual conscience to action, understood as the structuring unit of social life. According to John Dewey in his article *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology*, it is not possible to trace beforehand casual

relationships between environmental stimuli and organic reactions, since this thought separates the constitutive dimension of action during the interactive processes, since “[...] it is the action that determines the relevant stimuli within the context defined by the action itself” (JOAS, 1999, p. 135). Therefore, the unique and constitutive aspect of a space (immediate, but also cultural, context) and a duration (immediate as well as historic) results in the action no longer being understood as a mere concrete manifestation of the subject’s previous intentionality. This fact points towards the impossibility of control attributed to the Cartesian subject, once the action is always characterized by the shock between the expected and the unexpected.

2.4 Natural History

The finishing touch to Mead’s ideas is supplied by the Theory of the Evolution of Species, from the British naturalist Charles Darwin. It is only under this influence that the North-American sociologist can present “[...] a theory, in terms of natural history, of the mind and of the self-reflexive intelligence in the human species” (FARR, 2008, p. 80). For such, Mead promoted a phylogenetic analysis to observe, based on the discontinuities between the species, which adaptive advantages

5 For Mead, conscience is formed from the interaction with the other, from social interaction. Odair Sass (1992) considers that Mead’s position is a reference to Hegel’s ideas, especially the dialectic of the master and the slave presented in his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

6 An interesting explanation for the ostracism of G. H. Mead from the reference board of North-American Social Psychology during large part of the XXth century – his importance being restricted to sociologists, especially by intermediation of the appropriation of Herbert Blumer – for Robert Farr (2008), consists in his filiation to the Hegelian paradigm in detriment to the Cartesian, which defined the hegemonic statue of science that was popular at the time.

were genuinely human, through which he found the emergence of a *self* and the posterior elaboration of a language. According to the idea of emergence *self* is not a given product, nor a physical entity, but a social process that can be developed by the human species, a possibility that refers to an ontogenetic issue, that is, of the development of each individual member of the species. The Meadian *self* is defined as “[...] a reflexive form of the human subject that will result from the acquisition, in the course of social interaction, of a meaning of an individual self from the point of view of the significant relationships of conduct in an intersubjective context.” (SÁNCHEZ DE LA YNCERA, 1994, p. 206-207, our translation). In a practical manner, the notion of *self* relates to the human capacity of placing himself in the place of the other, a precondition for the development of the mind, its self-reflexive capacity. Thus, it can be seen that Wundt was wrong when presuming the existence of the mind, once this is a natural phenomenon that emerges during the course of social life. With this, different from what the German psychologist believed in, Mead is able to demonstrate that it is language that creates the mind, as well as evidences the bond that exists between mind and behavior. This happens because the development of the self-reflexive capacity only occurs insofar as the individuals in action learn to manage language, and, consequently, the system of social regulation that it carries. In this sense, “[...] the mind emerges from the social conduct through a process of interiorization of social

response habits when facing typical situations, allowed by the use of symbols” (SÁNCHEZ DE LA YNCERA, 1994, p. 181, our translation).

2.5 The dynamism of social life

One of Mead’s recurrent concerns is the attempt to capture the dynamism of social life. In a sophisticated manner, the social psychologist understands the constitution of society from the permanent tension between the tendency towards regulation and the possibility of the emergence of the new. Transferring this problematic to the action of individuals, Mead seeks to demonstrate that the world of life, although its existence is not questioned, is open to being questioned. The disposition towards regulation, in this case, is guaranteed by the formation of action habits. The self-reflexive activity, that enables the emergence of the new, is only activated when problems arise, that is, when a habit is questioned and then one chooses to respond to an action in a way that is different from the expected. The expression of this tension was manifested by Mead in her analytic distinction of *self*:

[...] the *me* is a conventional, habitual individual. It is always present. It has to have the habits, the reactions that everyone has; otherwise, the individual could not be a member of society. But the individual reacts constantly to such organized community, expressing himself to himself, not necessarily affirming himself in the offensive sense, but rather expressing himself, being *himself* in the cooperative process that corresponds to any community. The attitudes involved are extracted from the group but the individual that organizes himself

has the opportunity to give them an expression that, maybe, has never existed before. (MEAD, 1993, p. 223, author's italics).

The analytical decomposition of *self* into *myself* and *me* helps to understand in an even more complete manner the meaning of *self* as a synthesis bond that promotes a coherent link between the ideas of mind and society. In this panorama, *myself* represents the subject portion of *self* that refers to the present time of the action (now). *Myself* refers to the more impulsive character of interaction, being the part responsible for offering a certain degree of freedom to the mind and also for being associated in a discrete manner to the uncertainty that is inherent to the communicative processes. On the other hand, *me* is its opposite correlate. If *myself* refers to a certain sovereignty of the mind, *me* tips the scale to the other side and points to the power of society in the constitution of human relationships. Therefore, *me* corresponds to the object part of the formation of the *self* and is associated to the accumulation of experience. Their action times are precisely the past and the future, corresponding to the more organized, predictable and reflexive part of the *self*.

From the Meadian understanding of *self* the double meaning of the word subject can be extracted: one of active character, that transforms social reality; and the other of passive character, expressed by a submission to external instances that limit and model the possibility of action in the world. Hence, in Mead's panorama, interaction

is seen as a dynamic and living process, because it is able to update the norms and values expressed by society and also open space for its reconfiguration, allowing the increase of the above-mentioned collection of socialization possibilities, since the expectations pre-established by the subjects can also be destroyed and subverted so as to incorporate new forms of existing and being in the world.

However, Odair Sass (2004, p. 111) provides two important ponderations. The first one points out that in daily life the *me* (aspect of *self* oriented towards society) tends to ponder on the *myself* (impulsive aspect of the *self*). The second, in turn, says that "[...] the *self* does not presume the elimination of the impulsive character of the individual, but, on the other hand, presumes that such character be controlled in its behavioral manifestations by the social aspect."

3 The order of interaction

As concerns me, I believe that it is up to us to study the social life of men as naturalists, sub specie aeternitatis.

Goffman, 1999

When Erving Goffman arrived at the University of Chicago in the 1940's, Sociology had already completed its institutionalization process in the United States. If on one hand the creation of a sociological tradition deprived him of the need to discuss structural issues regarding the field's delimitation, on the other hand, Goffman

decided to initiate another equally thorny task: provide visibility to a series of phenomena that even Sociology at that time used to relegate to a secondary position, since it was far more concerned with macrostructural phenomena. Rules for the circulation of pedestrians on the sidewalks, indications on labels, the relationship between couples and the behavior of people in a hospital's waiting room are only some of the numerous phenomena that the clinical eyes of the Canadian researcher were not capable of overlooking:

My concern for years was to promote the acceptance of this domain of face to face as an analytically viable domain – a domain that could be denominated, for lack of a better word, as *order of interaction* – a domain whose preferred method of analysis is the microanalysis (GOFFMAN, 1999, p. 195, author's italic).

The intellectual project developed throughout Goffman's life had as a major objective the consolidation of the order of interaction as a specific domain in Sociology studies. For such, the full understanding of the meaning of this project requires a presentation of the conceptual bases that provided support to the micro-sociological perspective elaborated by this author. In this respect it is necessary to emphasize the central influence of George Herbert Mead's ideas in the conception of society that guide the empirical observations of Erving Goffman.

3.1 On Mead's shoulders

A first point to be emphasized refers to the fact that Goffman questioned the use of individualist

as well as holistic models regarding the conception of social life. The social world, for the Canadian sociologist, is a "product that emerges from the actions of individuals" (SMITH, 2004, p. 54).

Just like in the social model developed by Mead, interaction has a predominant role for Goffman, insofar as it allows the construction of a reference intersubjectivity that "guides" the action of individuals. It is no coincidence that the Meadian notion of *self* is central in Goffmanian thought. A strong evidence in this direction is provided by the sociologist himself: "[...] so the factor that received a great deal of attention from G. H. Mead emerges, that is, the special mutuality of immediate social interaction. Individuals assume the attitude of the presence of others, regardless of the objective according to which they apply the information they thus acquire" (GOFFMAN, 2010, p. 26-27).

Similar to Mead, Goffman emphasizes singularity and, consequently, the unpredictability inherent to moments of interaction insofar as he also recognizes the central tension that exists in the *self*, that is, the struggle between me and myself, even though he doesn't nominally use Mead's analytical distinction. This fact lead him to affirm that "[...] our experience in the world has a confrontational character." (GOFFMAN, 1999, p.200). The interface with the dimension of *me* can be verified insofar as the Canadian sociologist emphasizes the argument that each participant of a social situation brings with himself a "[...] biography that is already rich in past interactions with other participant of the

same type in the same way as he comes with a large amount of cultural preconceptions that he assumes are shared” (GOFFMAN, 1999, p. 201). The inventory of previous social experiences contemplates a stock of problems solved by the participant that is subject to being activated in the condition of a habitual solution in a posterior interaction. Evidently, this dimension points towards social regulation. On the other hand, Goffman says that “[...] psychology is necessarily involved in the appropriate study of interaction” (GOFFMAN, 1967 *apud* SMITH, 2004, p. 53). With this, the Canadian thinker foresees the fact that the human being is never integrally regulated by society, once it is constituted as a totality supplied with specific motivations. This individual character, in turn, refers to the notion of myself insofar as it places in the forefront the possibility of the emergence of specific colorings during the course of an interaction:

The investigation and analysis carried out by Goffman are anchored on Mead's proposition on the multiplicity of the possibility of behaviors of an individual, that in a determined social situation presents a range of such conducts at the same time as he omits others; on the possibilities of an individual, that, in a determined social situation, presents himself in several manners. (SILVA, 2008, p. 92).

Therefore, Goffman, starts out from the same interactive model provided by Mead to conceive

society. However, what is at stake for the Canadian sociologist is another problem, that is, how do social interactions operate? This issue points out that the focus of Goffman's concentrations regards a certain type of radiography of the Meadian me, that is, the Canadian researcher seeks to observe, in concrete situations, the way society tries to organize itself and, sometimes, regulate daily interactions. In other words, “Goffman carries on Mead's suppositions performing a detailed analysis of the face to face interactions in concrete situations” (SILVA, 2008, p. 92). The false impression that the analysis of social life proposed by Goffman sounds immobilist is more related to its sociological formalism than to the conception of society that is the basis for the Canadian researcher's ideas.

3.2 A sociology of forms

Amidst this context, in the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman proposes the metaphor of the theater⁷ as a very important analytical instrument for understanding the order of interaction. However, the amplitude of the Canadian researcher's undertaking is better comprehended, as Greg Smith (2004) points out, in the context of the notion of Sociology that delimits Goffman's

7 Curiously, according to Silva (2008), Mead himself, in the core of his notes, through his terminology, molds in an incipient manner the idea of the theater as an analogy for the conception of social life, as can be attested in the following excerpts: “In certain occasions we *act* and ask ourselves what effect our attitude will have” (MEAD, 1993, p. 178); and “[...] the child pretends to be a mother, a teacher, a police officer; that is, he *interprets determined roles*” (MEAD, 1993, p. 180, our italics).

ideas, that is, a formal Sociology, whose paternity can be attributed to the German philosopher Georg Simmel.

The theorization developed by Simmel is characterized by the process of the institutionalization of Sociology. The German thinker sought to promote a distinction between what was social and what was specifically sociological. Electing social life as an object of Sociology did not confer a specificity to this new science, since such object, displayed in such an ample manner, was already the fruit of speculation in other fields of knowledge, fields that were delimited in an imprecise manner and that many times were intertwined. The fertile terrain for Sociology, in the Simmelian conception, consisted in the exploration of the relationship between the notions of social form and content. While the other disciplines analyzed the contents diffused in the heart of society, the German philosopher called attention to the need of conceptually building and analyzing the operation of certain abstractions that would be capable of sharing the material of social life among the individuals that are part of it. He called these abstractions forms. Based on this idea, Simmel tried to demonstrate that the eminently social aspect does not concern the content of the motivations that lead individuals to undertake actions in the domain of social

life, but these invisible structures that model these contents and allow the construction of an intersubjectivity inside the social body.⁸ The choice of forms as the object of sociological attention is very important, because it dislocates the reference of isolated subjects for interaction as a place for the constitution of society, after all, to take form means to become shared. The distinction between form and content is only analytical because in social life these two dimensions are amalgamated, which also confers singularity to the interactions between individuals.

It is only in the light of understanding the formal Simmelian Sociology project that the epigraphy above incorporates its true meaning, once the latin expression *sub specie aeternitatis* can be translated into English as “under the aspect of eternity”. This means saying that Goffman’s undertaking of promoting the order of interaction seeks to, in a direct manner, extract valid universal principles from prosaic situations, that is, call attention to the formal aspect of interaction. Therefore, even though he recognizes the existence of specific motivations from the social actors throughout their presentations, such motivations are not relevant to Goffman. The Canadian thinker reaffirms his focus based on a linguistic metaphor: “[...] I suppose that the appropriate study of interaction is not in

8 To make the distinction between form and content more evident, Simmel proposes an interesting exercise, that is, to fix a parameter (or a form or a content) and observe its recurrence throughout a series of manifestations from its correlate pair. For example, the form hierarchy. This sharing mode can be filled in by several contents, such as family, religion or military. An economic content, on the other hand, can be inserted in distinct forms such as in a competition, in relationships of domination and subordination or even in friendship.

the individual and his psychology, but in the *syntactical* [and not semantic] relationships between the acts of different people with each other.” (GOFFMAN, 1971, p. 12, our translation and italic).

The formal notion of Sociology that is implied in the ideas developed by Goffman makes the concepts developed by him using the theatrical metaphor as an undertaking of side, deference and conduct, embarrassment, team and social work, actually, forms of interaction regulation. However, this regulation cannot be understood purely as determination, but as a principle of orientation that seeks to help social actors to recognize the places that are more appropriate to the situation of specific interaction, to be able to trace lines of conduct that are more suitable with the expectations negotiated during the communicative process.

3.3 Embarrassment: a typically Goffmanian form

Regarding the problematic of understanding the way interactions are regulated, one of the forms that stands out the most in Goffman’s work refers to the importance of the notion of embarrassment:

[...] such sentiment derives from an unbalance between the social projection carried out by an individual and eventual occurrences that can emerge during the development of an interaction that contradicts it. When someone informs what he is socially, in a certain way this exerts a moral requirement for the participants of the interaction, once he expects to be treated according to the social

category he deems he belongs to (MARTINS, 2008, p.140)

The actor’s greatest fear, that he should be socially discredited, besides generating an emotional discomfort, ends up making him act based on scripts elaborated from forms of idealization of shared conducts, which ends up leaning towards the preponderance of social order in detriment of the possibilities of the emergence of new conducts. Regarding this aspect there is a great proximity between the Goffmanian embarrassment and the notion of social coercion and sanction present in the theorization of Durkheimian Sociology.

However, it is necessary to better problematize the idea of embarrassment so that its meaning as a social form is clearer. Thus, the presence of such sentiment is a possibility that can surface in any daily communication, a fact that emphasizes its universal trend. However, the emergence of this embarrassment is intimately related to a concrete communication situation. Therefore, for the same stimulus received during a certain occasion, while a participant is visibly overcome by embarrassment, the other, occupying a similar position, does not suffer the influence of this sentiment during the course of the interaction. Under which contexts does embarrassment mold the representation of the social actors? This question evidences the constitutive dimension of the filters of culture and history in the delimitation of occasions that are subject or not subject to embarrassment. This makes it clear

that embarrassment is a recognized feeling that can organize the positioning of actors in a communicative exchange.

4 Life and form

The relationship between Mead's theoretical construct and Goffman's theatrical development can also be considered from another prism. For such, this complementarity should be observed in the light of a fundamental Simmelian opposition between the instances of life and form. In a direct manner, the German philosopher argues that, on one hand, life necessarily needs a form to manifest itself, but on the other hand, a form delimits, secludes, imprisons, freezes the action of life. As a consequence of this paradox,

[...] the action originates itself in individuals that can only accomplish their own interests and motivations submitting themselves to forms, which are, in turn, subject to being modified by the motives of these individuals. Therefore, the tension between the demands from the structure and the agency is preserved by the dual character of the forms: they are superior structures to the course of action of an individual and exert pressure over him; even so, they can be produced and modified by the individuals in interaction, that exist by themselves (SMITH, 2004, p. 64).

According to the above-mentioned arguments, this article has the objective of creating bases for the construction of a more sophisticated model for the analysis of social life. Thus, the dialogue between George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman is very important because the problematics of these authors reedit the conflicting relationships

between life and form: while Mead offers a theoretical model of the constitution of society, showing the centrality of language and the production of senses in the creation of reality and *selves*, Goffman dialogues with the legacy of the social psychologist based on the elaboration of a methodological tool – his specific appropriation of the theater metaphor –, observing the regularities of social conduct in everyday practices, offering small snapshots capable of displaying certain aspects of interaction. As a result, human agency, in its concrete dimension, is the dynamic *locus* that integrates the complex tension between life and form.

Mead's social model, as well as Goffman's theatrical development, allow us to catch a glimpse, in their respective geneeses, of the constitutive social opposition between orientation towards habit and the possibility of the insurgence of the new based on communicative practices. Therefore, to polarize the ideas of these two authors in a perspective of the production of social life and in another of reproduction is to lose sight of the incessant tension that the article sought to point out. In Mead, the development of the *self* has as a precondition the existence of a shared intersubjectivity that molds and is continually molded by the distinct *selves*. Therefore, production and reproduction appear as probabilities of emergence in the course of an interaction. To conceive Mead's ideas in terms of production is to place in the background the constant attempt of society to regulate the

impulsive side of each individual. In Goffman, on the other hand, it is necessary to consider that the roles, even though they crystalize certain expectations of action shared by a society⁹ – understood here metaphorically as a script to be embodied –, are not capable of determining the course of action insofar as they only exist represented by actors. In other words, the relationship actor/social role reedit the tension myself/me insofar as the social form is filled out by a specific color – regarding the importance of the role’s generic character, the way in which it is embodied is unique.

Exploring the implications of the theater metaphor is also an important exercise to reveal the dynamic potential that this perspective can offer for the analysis of social life. Different from a movie, for example, the theater’s distinctive characteristic is the singularity of each one of its performances. Thus, each time the actors interpret society’s script, they are simultaneously rewriting this script when adding to the existing lines the capacity of improvisation, the modalization of their emotions, and, also, eventual performance errors – which are many times important for comprehensive social redefinitions that can be converted, posteriorly, into new regulation possibilities.

5 Mead, Goffman and the field of Communication

During an Art Education class in a private school in Santos (SP), the male teacher, who was standing, sat on top of a table to continue his explanation and decided to cross his legs. Noticing this, a student, surprised, asked, “But, teacher, are you going to cross your legs like that?” Without understanding, the teacher asked, “What do you mean, like that?” The student quickly answered, “My father said that only women cross their legs like that (one thigh on top of the other).” And in a professorial tone, continued: “Men cross their legs like this (ankle on top of thigh).”

The above-mentioned situation is very clarifying, once it provides interesting elements to understand the pertinence and reach of the legacy of Mead and Goffman in the constitution of the field of Communication. First of all, the centrality of the interaction when pointing to the active and reflexive character of the subjects in the constitution of the social world should be pointed out, insofar as the communicative exchange allows the thematization and eventual modification of a set of shared values regarding gender relations. Therefore, to say that communication creates reality is to recognize that society is performed

9 For Mead, human society relates to the production, by means of communicative processes, of an intersubjectivity that coordinates interactive practices. From this, it can be inferred that society is produced and reproduced constantly by individuals in interaction. But not only this: society also produces these individuals, and, insofar as it understands the objectification of values and practices that regulate the individuals, it ends up being displayed as a precondition for the development of the self and, consequently, of the mind. The idea of the generalized other, in this context, is strictly related to the notion of social role present in Goffman, after all it is associated “[...] to the role of community, that is, we assume the organized answer of the community in question when facing a concrete situation or subject” (SÁNCHEZ DE LA YNCERA, 1994, p. 216, our translation).

and personified based on historic and cultural categories that are conflicting and shared by means of language — a common but irregular terrain — and concretely affect the actions of subjects. In this sense, the interaction matrix understands communication as a relational process, according to a more refined paradigmatic understanding for issues that are currently included in this field.

Taking a closer look at the specificities of this situation, the modalization of interaction by means of social roles can be perceived. Even though there is a power asymmetry between the position of the teacher and the student, expressed by specific symbolic representations,¹⁰ there is always the possibility of rupture of expectations: the student, without being fully aware of it, put the teacher in a situation of potential embarrassment, and, temporarily, inverted the power relationship mentioned above. Interaction is an unpredictable moment because it requires the adjustment of an action in its development. How would the teacher react under such circumstances? He could joke around and imitate a homosexual, or pull himself together and minimize the occurrence — revealing a feeling of embarrassment —, or maybe he could be capable of problematizing the issue or retorting the embarrassment. The forms at stake — embarrassment, roles — do not determine the reaction of the subject, although they help to understand the social meaning of a determined

action, such as the tendency to stigmatize homosexuals or a certain idea of masculine normativeness, for example.

Goffmanian snapshots, from the point of view of the Meadian reflexive communication, are important tools for understanding the complexity of social life, with its conflicting dynamic oscillating between the pretensions of divergent symbolic systems personified by struggles between distinct social actors on the stage of everyday life. Amidst this cubism, the importance of communication and human agency as sides of the coin of social construction of reality should be pointed out.

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¹⁰ For example, the position of the teacher in front of the class, authority of speech, domain of specific vocabulary, distinct garments.

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Entre a vida e a forma: agência humana e comunicação nos rastros de Mead e Goffman

Resumo:

O presente artigo tem por objetivo propor uma nova leitura a respeito da relação existente entre o pensamento do psicólogo social George Herbert Mead e do sociólogo Erving Goffman. Para tanto, o percurso traçado procura, num primeiro momento, apresentar as problemáticas de cada autor – a construção do *self* e a ordem da interação, respectivamente – para, posteriormente, evidenciar certa complementaridade entre suas perspectivas. Por fim, são oferecidas algumas pistas de como esta revisão no olhar sociológico, baseado na centralidade da interação social, permite complexificar a discussão sobre os processos comunicativos e a agência humana.

Palavras-chave:

Comunicação. Interação. Agência Humana. Sujeitos.

Entre la vida y la forma: la agencia humana y la comunicación en los pasos de Mead y Goffman

Resumen:

Este artículo tiene por objeto proponer una nueva lectura sobre la relación entre el pensamiento del psicólogo social George Herbert Mead y el sociólogo Erving Goffman. Por lo tanto, la ruta establecida búsqueda, en un primer momento, presentar los problemas de cada autor – la construcción del yo y el orden de la interacción, respectivamente – para mostrar entonces una complementariedad entre sus puntos de vista. Por último, se ofrecen pistas sobre cómo esta revisión sociológica, basado en la centralidad de la interacción social, permite complejizar el debate sobre la comunicación y la acción humana.

Palabras clave:

Comunicación. Interacción.

Agencia Humana. Sujetos.

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