

# New Perspectives on Goffman in Language and Interaction

## Body, Participation and the Self

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## 13 The social organization of (in-)attention

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# 13 The social organization of (in-)attention

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## 1. Introduction

Goffman's 1953 dissertation thesis "Communication Conduct in an Island Community" can in many ways be regarded as a kind of gene pool out of which several themes of his later work evolved. This also applies to a short chapter entitled "The organization of attention" (Goffman, 1953, pp. 196–205). The topic of attention – its selectivity, its granting, its withdrawal, its avoidance, its distribution – runs through Goffman's entire work. Although his studies show that attention is a crucial dimension of the interaction order, he did not elaborate this topic systematically. The study of attention was later refined and enriched by conversation analysts who showed and underlined the particular role of visual displays of attentiveness in social interaction. Urban sociologists have picked up Goffman's seminal work and have identified, following a line of Georg Simmel's sociology, the management of attention as an essential element of public life.

In the following paper we shall first (1) reconstruct Goffman's notion of "focused interaction" and some of its differentiations in his work. Then (2) we shall ask how shared attention, as a main feature of focused interaction, is brought about. For this we shall turn in a parallel topical thread to the psychological research on "joint attention" and discuss how this approach differs from or amplifies Goffman's studies. Next (3) it will be shown with reference to some of Cartier-Bresson's photos that Goffman's contrastive frame of reference, juxtaposing in opposition focused and unfocused interaction, needs to be supplemented by a third type of attention order, in which members' attention is collectively oriented to an outward event. After a discussion (4) of some of the practices with which interlocutors sustain and re-establish a focus of attention, we will show in a small conversation analytic vignette (5) that by displaying inattention certain interactional purposes can be achieved. Finally (6) we shall pick up Goffman's concept of "civil inattention", discuss various protective practices against untoward involvement in public and point out some historical

and sociological dimensions along which this concept can be broadened and further studied.

## 2. Focused interaction

Goffman's treatment in his thesis of 1953 is the very first sociological account of the basic role of attention in social interaction. Of course, attention has always been a topic of the philosophy of mind and in psychology. And when during the 19th century the demand on trained, focused and reliable workers increased, the psychological research of attention and associated phenomena exploded (Crary, 2000). These studies remained within the ego perspective of a single individual's mind, e.g., when they analyzed the selectivity or "focalization" (James, 1890, p. 404) of attention, made experiments with distraction and attentiveness or pondered on the difference between voluntary and involuntary attention (Mead, 1934, p. 95f.). Some researchers quite early on suggested a sociological perspective on attention (Ribot, 1898, p. 39). But it was left to Goffman to overcome the psychological single-actor perspective and to identify the organization of attention as a main feature of social interaction.

Central to Goffman's reflections on the role of attention in social interaction is the concept of "focused interaction", first introduced in his 1961 book "Encounters". A closer look reveals that this concept is quite complex in nature and involves multiple levels of the organization of attention. According to Goffman (1961, p. 7) "focused interaction" denotes the primordial type of social encounter, comprising an interactional event such as a board game, a joint task, or a conversation during which the participants establish and maintain a single cognitive focus of attention between them. The term "focus" refers to an essential feature of the phenomenon of attention. Perception can be more or less directional like a beam, it can be narrowed, concentrated and zoomed in on a single point, but it can also be expanded, un-directional and "free floating" ("gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit"; Freud, 1912, p. 483). Attention denotes the mode of perceptual directedness; it effectuates a differentiation of the perceivable objects into center and periphery or foreground and background. "Focused" interaction implies that the "attention beams" of two individuals are directed at the same topic or activity for a certain stretch of time. Their respective cognitive operations are geared to the same object or event and pursue its development.

The concentration of two individuals on one and the same object does, however, not suffice. A focused interaction presupposes that a speaker has found an addressee and that the intended addressee is oriented toward the speaker and his actions. The two individuals must have noticed and

acknowledged each other as co-interactors. This mutual co-orientation of the interlocutors is strikingly captured in the following photo of Cartier-Bresson (cf. Galassi, 1991, p. 64).

Cartier-Bresson was a French photographer. Born in 1908, Cartier-Bresson was 14 years older than Goffman, but outlived him by 22 years. So, during all the years that Goffman was active in creative work, Cartier-Bresson was too. While Goffman renewed sociology of interaction, Cartier-Bresson renewed photojournalism. His pictures are photographic representations of the scenes and encounters that Goffman has analyzed so meticulously.

The photo (Figure 13.1), taken 1932 in Marseille, depicts a moment of interaction between a policeman and a group of workers who gaze at each other in a slightly hostile encounter. It shows that the mutual co-orientation of two individuals is not just a cognitive operation “within” the individuals. It must be made visible or hearable to the others and also repeatedly displayed during the interaction.

Although Goffman’s juxtaposition of focused and unfocused interaction suggests a sharp contrast, in reality there is not a fixed distinction between attention and inattention. People are able to a certain degree to scale their attention. Such an ability is quintessential in everyday life since full concentration of the attentive capacity onto one single object would imply a dangerous blindness for all other events. In everyday interaction we pay more or less attention to the object at hand and are more or less open to other events in the surrounding area. Goffman (1963a, p. 60) indeed



*Figure 13.1* © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

considered this relative distribution of attention as normative: “the individual is required to give visible evidence that he has not wholly given himself up to this main focus of attention. Some slight margin of self-command and self-possession will typically be required and exhibited.”

Along with the ability to scale attention there is another feature which is of relevance for attention in social interaction. Attention is not only displayed through gaze as the following photo by Cartier-Bresson depicts (Figure 13.2).

The photo captures Minister of Justice Robert Kennedy in 1962, apparently by his pool, with his son. The boy focuses on his father’s hand, he seems to play with it as if something of interest is hidden there. The father, resting in the sun, enjoys teasing his son with his playfully clenched hand, while the boy playfully tries to open his father’s fist to get access to the little secret.

Father and son do not have eye contact, but they clearly are in interaction with each other. Evidently, the meeting of gazes is not a precondition of shared attention. Rather, conjoint attention can be accomplished by touch or responsive alignment with the other’s activities. Cartier-Bresson’s photo further shows that actors are able to do various things at the same time and, thus, to divide their attention into what Goffman 1963a, p. 43ff) has called main and side involvement. Whereas the boy’s main attention is absorbed by the father’s fist and its possible content, Kennedy’s dominant



*Figure 13.2* © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

involvement is relaxation on the lounge, while at the same time his subordinate involvement is the play with his son's effort to uncover the hidden object in his hand. The distinction between main and side involvement is not always as peaceful as is captured in Cartier-Bresson's photo. Goffman (1963a) makes a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate side involvements. Potentially illegitimate side involvements include, for example, attention paid to one's own body or reverie (dwelling in own thoughts and fantasies) during interaction with others.

### 3. The socializing of attention

Goffman was well ahead of his time in understanding the centrality of shared attention for social interaction. It was only two decades after him that other researchers started to build a systematic account of attention in the social world. Their perspective was, however, quite different from Goffman's, as they came from developmental psychology (see e.g. Trevarthen & Hubley, 1978; Trevarthen, 1979; Bruner, 1983). The research of the developmentalists was done without reference to Goffman, but there are lots of points where they took up themes parallel to Goffman's. We will go through some central issues in the developmental psychology research, discussing how it could enrich the Goffmanian understanding of the attention. The developmental literature can serve as a prism that helps us to see a bit more clearly the ramifications of conjoint visual and cognitive attention.

While Goffman considered participants' conjoint attention as a key aspect of social organization of interaction, for the developmentalists it is an achievement, a competence that emerges in individuals in phases during the first years of life. Developmental research has outlined roughly three forms of attention that are relevant for our understanding of Goffmanian sociology. (1) *Mutual attention between infant and caregiver* is the earliest form of socially shared attention. From about two months, infants can engage in "simple eye-to-eye joint attention" (Bruner, 1995) with the caregivers, where they gaze at and engage with each other (Reddy, 2005). Infants and caretakers are looking and listening to each other, attending to, and regulating each other's vocal, facial and gestural expressions, and the feelings and interests that these convey (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). (2) *Triadic attention to objects in the world* emerges around 9 months (Tomasello, 1999). It involves "a referential triangle of child, adult, and the object or event to which they share attention" (Tomasello, 1999, p. 62). Key activities in triadic attention include pointing – the infant starts to attract and direct the adult's attention by pointing to objects (Tomasello, 2008) – and gaze following – the infant starts to shift its gaze to the same

direction where the adult is looking at (Meltzoff & Brooks, 2007). (3) While mutual attention and triadic attention emerge during the first year of life, the *joint attention to mental content* develops later. Toward the end of the second year of life, children start to tell adults about prior events, thus attracting their attention to temporally distal events (Reddy, 2005). Recently, O'Madagaing and Tomasello (2021, p. 4062) showed evidence for children acquiring competence to engage in "conversation about a *mental content*" such as plans or beliefs during the fifth year of life. This competence involves understanding that persons can have attitudes (for example, considering a belief right or wrong) to such contents.

"Visual and cognitive attention" was the phrase that Goffman repeatedly used to denote what is shared in social encounters. He used the expression in a rather non-technical way and did not make distinction between the visual and cognitive aspects, or discuss their relation. The account of joint attention in developmental psychology highlights the distinction between the cognitive and the visual. The visual attention is there developmentally first, in the mutual attention between infant and caregiver from about two months. Something that might be called cognitive attention emerges only thereafter: in the triadic attention to the objects in the world, and finally in the attention to mental contents.

The distinction between mutual attention and triadic attention (be the "third" concrete objects or mental contents) is also important. Developmentally, the mutual attention between the participants in interaction is primary; as Reddy (2005) formulates it, "that the experience of being the object of another's attention in mutual attention is vital for any further understanding of the nature and scope of attentionality" (86). Goffman was not interested in the development of attentional competences, but it seems that he still acknowledged the primacy of the mutual attention between interactants (as compared to shared attention to the world). In *The Neglected Situation* (Goffman, 1964) he defined social situation as "an environment of mutual monitoring possibilities" where "an individual will find himself accessible to the naked senses of all others who are 'present', and similarly find them accessible to him" (p. 135). For Goffman, this was the attentional basis of interaction, on which more complex interactional arrangements are built. Mutual attention, or the possibility of it, seems to be both developmentally and socially the substratum of other forms of attention and interaction.

Among developmentalists who investigate joint attention, Reddy (2005) is particularly relevant for Goffmanian understanding of attention. She argues that attention is not best understood as a mental state or mental representation, but rather as the action of attending. This is particularly relevant regarding joint attention: infant and caretaker acting together and being engaged incorporates their mutual attention and also the experience

of the other attending the self. Goffman implied, rather than explicated, the ways in which organization of attention is embedded in the organization of action (see however Goffman, 1964, p. 135). The more detailed picture of the intertwining of the organization of action and the organization of attention can come from video-based conversation analytical studies: CA work gives a very detailed, emergent picture of the action-attention relations, particularly by showing how gaze has different functions in different actions (e.g., storytelling and turn-by-turn talk) and in different sequential junctures (Rossano, 2013).

Another specification that Reddy (2005) makes involves the emotional dimension of attention. The first form of joint attention, the mutual attention between infant and caretaker, is thoroughly emotional. It often involves the sharing of joy and surprise. Sharing of emotions – such as surprise, admiration and amusement – is important also in the triadic attention to objects in the world (Tomasello et al., 2007). While the attention-emotion linkage seems not to be central for Goffman, he does acknowledge that the immersion in the shared focus of attention in conversation results in a “firm sense of reality”, while the erosion of shared attention is intertwined with uneasiness (Goffman, 1957). More than its emotional ramifications, Goffman addresses the moral ramifications of shared attention, emphasizing how the maintenance of shared cognitive and visual attention is an obligation in encounters (see especially Goffman, 1957). This, as far as we know, is something not discussed by the developmentalists.

In Reddy's account, the earliest form of shared attention involved the infant's experience of being the object of another's attention. Here, two cardinal themes of Goffman, attention and self, seem to intertwine. From about 7 or 8 months, the infant starts to attract the adult's attention to themselves by clowning (to elicit laughter) and showing off (to elicit praise) (Reddy, 2005, p. 101). In such scenes might reside the developmentally first form of ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman, 1956). The initial self-presentation is thus very tightly tied to regulation of attention. From very early on, infants can also be distressed and anxious because of the (untimely) attention that the adult gives to them (Reddy, 2005). Perhaps here is the earliest precursor of the anxiety for face that is so central in the Goffmanian view of interaction between adults (Goffman, 1956). In these early moments, it is not the others' judgment regarding the attributions of the self that invokes anxiety (as in the adult world described by Goffman; see also Peräkylä in this volume), but rather, the anxiety emerges from the other's attention to the self being there, existing, in the first place.

In this section, we have touched upon some potential linkages and parallels between Goffman's account of organization of attention in interaction, and the developmental psychology of joint attention. Developmental psychologists focused on the emergence of attentional competences, while



Goffman described the interactional mechanisms that are built upon such competences. The developmentalists do not refer to Goffman, but it appears that Goffman anticipated many themes that they, after him, took up. We saw that developmental psychology might clarify some facets of Goffman's account, such as the distinction between visual and cognitive attention, the fundamental significance of mutual monitoring and the intertwining of self and attention.

#### 4. Outward focused gathering

In his studies Goffman was mainly dealing with the question of how two or more individuals manage their mutual attention during a social encounter. He is mainly concerned with the internal organization of face-to-face gatherings during which the participants attend to each other and to the joint focus of their activities. His primary case is the "focused gathering" (Goffman, 1961, p. 8) of two interactants who are fully oriented to each other and whose "encounter" Goffman calls "the natural unit of social organization" (*ibid.*). He also mentions "partly-focused gatherings" (Goffman, 1963a, p. 91) which include third participants who are unengaged, and he furthermore singles out "multifocused gatherings" (*ibid.*), when more than three persons are present and more than one encounter is carried on. All these distinctions indicate that for Goffman "focused interaction" is the paradigmatic case from which other subvariants of gatherings can be derived. "Where no focused interaction occurs, the term 'unfocused gathering' can be used". Goffman (1963a, p. 24) writes and identifies social encounters during which two individuals meet without relating to each other as a second type of attention order. (We shall deal with this anonymous mode of "unfocused interaction" below).

There is, however, a third type of social gathering to which we were alerted by a series of Cartier-Bresson's photos. These pictures show individuals who not just happen to be in the same place but who share the experience of an external event to which their full attention is directed. When a group of visitors to an art exhibition look at the same picture at the same time, their attention is indeed focused on the same object, but they are not in a "focused interaction" in Goffman's sense. They are a gathering of individuals with hardly any exchange, but with a shared object of their attention. An example of such an outward focused gathering is captured in the following photo of Cartier-Bresson (Figure 13.3).

Taken in 1956 in Warsaw (Poland), the photo shows a Mass led by Cardinal Wyszyński where 22 priests are ordained. Hundreds of participants at church have directed their gaze forwards, apparently to the altar of the church where the cardinal is celebrating. Although the actors in this event stand so closely adjacent, that they in fact touch each other, they hardly



*Figure 13.3* © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

take notice of – let alone interact with – each other. They are not just a “crowd”; they are all gazing in the same direction, thus forming an audience or congregation. Likewise, in another Cartier-Bresson photo from Copenhagen, 1953 (Figure 13.4), the militants of the Danish Socialist Party are all attending to an event associated with Constitution Day.



*Figure 13.4* © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos



*Figure 13.5* © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

The event to which the Copenhagen socialists pay their total attention is not visible to the viewer of the photo. What can be seen, though, is that they are all gazing in the same direction, alertness and excitement in their faces. And although the viewers look at the event as individual participants they are cognitively and emotionally bound together by their synchronized mode of attending to the same external object. In the following photo of Cartier-Bresson (Figure 13.5), taken at Derby Day at Epsom, England, in 1953 shows spectators whose full attention is captured by the spectacle toward which their gaze is directed.

The onlookers are standing there motionless, isolated and not oriented to each other. Each of them is individually related to the single event outside of their scope of action but they are able to see the other participants at the fringe of their perceptual field. The awareness of this shared moment and their synchronized mode of acting turns them into an emotional community of experience.

Social gatherings, in which the participants form an audience or a congregation by collectively attending to an external event, is of a different kind than the focused gathering of two co-present individuals. Of course, audience members may initiate a “focused interaction” by starting to cheer, to clap, to boo, thus participating directly in the action occurring on the stage (Goffman, 1974, p. 125). But such rudimentary modes of interaction with actors on stage are heavily dependent on the type of gathering. During a concert of classical music, the audience members usually pay serious attention to the performance. They adopt a state of motionless contemplation and know how to “behave well” by restricting their expressions to a minimum and suppressing bodily sensations like coughing (Pitts,

2014, p. 25). The only moment when they can actually “interact” with the performers on the stage is the final acclaim. A similar restrictive, but slightly different mode of participation prevails during church service. The parishioners’ attention is geared to the liturgy and the priest’s activities, but more “interaction” between them is going on by common praying or antiphonal singing. In yet another type of outward focused gathering, “interaction” to an even higher degree is possible. In a political convention it is the participants’ task to pay attention to the speeches and to support the speakers who regularly provide slots for applause (Atkinson, 1984). Additional to these legitimate modes of interaction, the participants can move around in the assembly hall, chat with their neighbors or heckle the speakers. Other types of outward focused gatherings can easily be imagined (rock concerts, football matches etc.); all of them are characterized by implicit or explicit rules and traditions for the interaction of the audience with the protagonists on the stage or on the field. They differ from a simple crowd by their mode of synchronized and emotionally charged attention which affords them a deep collective experience.

### **5. Sustaining and re-establishing a focus of attention**

Attention is a limited capacity that constrains actors to decide upon which object or event they should attend. Attention is a scarce resource the economic quality of which (Franck, 1998) is indicated by colloquial expressions like “paying attention” or “Aufmerksamkeit schenken” (engl. “to donate attention”). Since attention can be paid only to so many objects, there is always the possibility that it is moved or drawn away from the target at hand to another one. The attentional orientation is therefore always vulnerable to disruption triggered by competing objects or events as can be seen in Cartier-Bresson’s photo shown above (Figure 13.6, cf. Figure 13.3).

In the middle lower part of this picture, a lady is whispering to another, and in front of them, there is another lady who is looking in a direction other than the altar. At least the lady by whispering in the cover of her hand appears to display an awareness of the illegitimacy of her inattention to the main event. Another case is the clergyman in the box at the right-hand side of the photo: he is looking down toward the congregation or to a book in front of him and his posture and orientation reveal that his ‘deviant’ involvement is a legitimate part of the occasion.

Attention has an ‘appreciative’ quality, and a denial of attention is taken to be a sign of disregard. Goffman (1967, p. 115) has also argued that the distribution of attention is morally coded, “so that some allocations of attention become socially proper and other allocations improper”. This moral commitment can be seen when a participant who has good excuses to withdraw involvement from a conversation senses that this will be taken



Figure 13.6 © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

as a discourtesy, and therefore continues the talking. The allocation of attention in a social gathering, its distribution or withholding, engenders costs as well as benefits. Georg Franck (1998), one of the pioneers in the study of attention economy, accords attention to the status of a currency that makes it necessary to decide how to invest it and how to gain the attention of others.

Participants in a social interaction not only establish a shared focus of attention and orient to their recipients and their actions, they also reflexively attend to the attention of their co-interactants. Their expectation is not that co-interactants continuously demonstrate through body orientation and eye contact that they attend to each other. As Cooley has already remarked, mutual attention only needs to be displayed “occasionally”. Charles Goodwin showed that these cues of attention are not delivered at random, but that the occasionality of the display of attention has a certain orderliness. With regard to conversational interaction, where participants take each other’s gaze as a display of attention, Goodwin (1980, p. 287) found a remarkable asymmetry between speaker and hearer. A speaker is not obliged to continuously gaze at the listener. During his/her turn at talk he/she can occasionally look away, and it is not an infringement if a recipient, looking at the speaker, would realize that the speaker is not looking at him/her. A recipient, too, does not have to gaze at the speaker all the time,

“but should be gazing at the speaker whenever he or she is being gazed at by the speaker” (Goodwin, 1980, p. 288).

A speaker who is looking at an addressed recipient and finds that the recipient is not looking at him/her or is engaged with other objects or events, can take this averted gaze as a sign of inattention and therefore lack of appreciation. In such a moment a speaker can try to regain the recipient's gaze and, thus, to re-establish the focus of attention. In schools and similar institutions, a pupil, whose attention is seemingly absorbed by activities beyond the educational realm, can be directly admonished by the teacher and asked to observe the attention order. In sociable everyday interaction the practices to sustain the focus of attention are more subtle. Based on video recordings Goodwin (1980) has shown that a speaker who realizes in the progress of his/her turn at talk, that the addressed recipient gazes in another direction, can interrupt his/her utterance. The occurring silence prompts the inattentive recipient to move his/her gaze back to the speaker in order to find out what made the conversation stop. At the point when the recipient's gaze realigns with the speaker, the mutual focus of attention is re-established and the speaker either restarts or continues with his/her utterance.

Competing for attention is particularly an issue in multi-party interaction and a prominent object of conversation analytic studies (see Mondada, 2013). A speaker talking to several recipients at the same time can wander with his gaze from one recipient to another, dividing and distributing his/her attention. A recipient's situation is more complicated. Since he/she is not expected to continuously gaze at the speaker, but only when the speaker is gazing at him/her, his/her gaze or attention can be drawn to a second conversation nearby. This, however, implies the risk that he/she is perceived as inattentive by the first speaker. In such a situation the recipient could try to attend simultaneously to two conversations, interactively taking part and giving attention cues in one, and suspending participation in the other but surreptitiously overhearing. Such “multi-tasking”, as it were, is, however, difficult to maintain, not least because it demands the recipient's occasional signs of attention at appropriate moments.

## **6. Displaying inattention in interaction**

In his article *Alienation from interaction*, Goffman (1957) suggested that in social interaction, there are two opposing tendencies: the normative pressure toward “conjoint spontaneous involvement”, and an inherent tendency toward alienation. A key facet of alienation is inattention. In spite of being against the norm, moments of alienation are common: “spontaneous ‘normal’ involvement seems to be the exception and alienation of some kind the statistical rule” (Goffman, 1957, p. 134). Goffman's

analysis is highly insightful, revealing surprising yet recognizable aspects of the organization of interaction. The account however remains on a general and abstract level. In the taxonomic way that is so characteristic to him (see also Inglis in this collection), Goffman lists different forms of alienation, such as external preoccupations, and enhanced consciousness regarding own performance, interaction partners, or the interaction process itself.

Conversation analysis can show more regarding the organization and functions of alienation. Not every occurrence of ‘inattention’ in social interaction is a sign of indifference toward the interaction. There are settings where displays of inattention can be used in a more active way, to show the person’s stance toward the interaction. We have investigated one such setting: couple therapy.

The participation framework of couple therapy is complex. Spouses talk about their marriage and about each other in the presence of a third party, the therapist. The interaction is largely organized through the therapist’s questions, alternately directed to each spouse. In their answers, the spouses normally address the therapist. The answers often involve complaints or criticism concerning the other spouse, who however is not the addressee and is not expected to respond (before the therapist will allocate a turn to them). We have studied the non-verbal behaviors of the spouses that are complained about. In several ways, they show inattention to the other spouse’s talk. Yet, this inattention is to be understood as a display of their negative stance toward what the spouse is saying. While a full account of these practices of disengagement will be presented elsewhere (Peräkylä et al., 2032), we will in the following show some of them.

One practice to show inattention during the spouse’s complaining talk involves turning away. The person shifts the direction of their head and the upper parts of their body away from the speaker. At the beginning of the Extract 1 below, the therapist asks the wife about her opinion of what the husband has just said about the couple’s problems, thereafter offering her the possibility to raise other matters (lines 6–7). In response, the wife takes up something that the husband spoke about earlier, characterizing the problem as lack of understanding between the spouses (lines 12 and 14–15). She claims that only very recently she understood that the husband’s laughter is not genuine: while laughing, he is “boiling inside” (line 20). Later (data not shown) she tells that in result, she feels very lonely.

After having looked in front of him, the husband in line 9 begins turning to the right, away from the wife. In line 12, he reaches a position where his head and upper part of body are turned away from the speaker and he is looking down (see Figure 13.7). This is his position through the rest of the wife’s account. While turning further away (lines 12 and 13), the husband also exhales audibly and clenches his jaw.



Excerpt 1 (Peräkylä, Tauroginski, Dejko et al., 2023). WIF=wife, HUS=Husband, THE=therapist)

01 THE: **Jeszcze chciałam zapytać pani. (.)**  
 I would like to ask you. (.) what is your  
 02 **wizja. (.) na to< na temat tej sprawy**  
 opinion. (.) on this< regarding this issue  
 ((three lines omitted))  
 06 **czy Pani chce, i o innej rzeczy**  
 or would you like to tell about  
 07 **jeszcze powiedzieć.**  
 different issue.  
 08 WIF: **To znaczy ja chciałabym**  
 it means I would+like  
 Well I would like to  
 09 **wrócić do tego co małżonek\$ jeszcze**  
 return to this what husband just  
 re\$turn to this what the hus+ba\$nd  
 wif: \$-----\$ points to H  
 hus: head gradually to the right and down+-->  
 10 **wcześniej [mówił erhm: o tym**  
 mentioned earlier erhm: tha::t  
 11 HUS: [ .hhhhhhh  
 12 **&[że:: y:: my& +się nie rozumiemy**  
 erm::: we don't understand each other  
 hus: &-----&clenching jaw  
 hus: ++-->fully turned away  
 13 HUS: [NNNNNNNNNNNN  
 14 **że (.) no >-bo\* się nie rozumiemy**  
 because we >-don't\* understand each other  
 \*Figure 13.7  
 15 **taka jest prawda.< .hhhh y:: Ja w zeszłym roku**  
 that's the truth.< .hhhh ermh:: Only last year  
 16 **(1.0) dopiero pierwszy raz po osiemnastu**  
 (1.0) for the first time after eighteen  
 17 **latach małżeństwa zauważyłam że**  
 years of marriage I noticed that  
 18 **jak małżonek się śmieje to nie**  
 while the husband is laughing it doesn't  
 19 **znaczy że on się śmieje, (2.0) on się**  
 mean that he is laughing, (2.0) he is  
 20 **śmieje, (2.0) ale on gotuje w środku**  
 laughing, (2.0) but he is boiling inside  
 21 **>rozumie pani<?**  
 >do you(f) understand<?



Figure 13.7



By turning away (Figure 13.7), the partner in Extract 1 shows inattention in an active way: he observably displays that he is turning his visual perception away from the speaker. Here, as elsewhere in our data, the display of inattention seems to convey disaffiliation with what the spouse is saying. In this context, the display of inattention is thus a paradoxical action: the person is engaged with the talk by showing disengagement (Peräkylä et al., 2023).

Looking at one's own hand is another way to display inattention. Consider Extract 2 below. The husband has named "problems with communication" as something that he would like to be solved in the therapy (data not shown). In line 1, the therapist asks for clarification. In response, the husband starts to tell about the wife "promising" something, which is hearable as allusion to promising (but not giving) sex (lines 3–9). Through the beginning part of the extract, the wife is holding her right hand next to her face. In line 6, as the husband's talk has indicated that he is delivering a complaint (lines 5–6: "all the time there is kind kind . . ."), the wife lowers her hand to a position in front of her. When the husband utters the key description of the complaint ("promising of something", line 7) the wife is looking at her hand (seemingly her fingernails; see Figure 13.8).

**Excerpt 2 (Peräkylä, Tauroginski, Dejko et al., 2023). WIF=wife, HUS=Husband, THE=therapist)**

- 01 **THE:** **Co to znaczy problemy z komunikacją?**  
What does it mean problems with communication?  
wif: >>> *hand as barrier*  
02 (2.5)
- 03 **HUS:** **hmm no (2.0) no właśnie (1.0) #mm:#**  
hmm well (2.0) that's the point (1.0) #mm:#
- 04 **(1.0) to z jednej strony taka komunikacja**  
(1.0) on the one hand such communication
- 05 **>że że< hmm: jest cały czas (.) j::akaś**  
>that that< hmm: all the time (.) the::re is
- 06 **.hhh jakaś jakiś \$jakiś\$**  
.hhh a kind kind \$kind of\$  
wif: \$-----\$drops hand to  
\$front of her face
- 07 **\$obi\*ecanie czegoś coś p]owiedz\*enie**  
pro\*missing of something saying something (.)  
wif: \$--> looking at hand  
\*Figure 13.8
- 08 **typu [zaraz:: (.) i i i i za tym**  
like any minute:: (.) and and and and there is
- 09 **tak naprawdę [nic nie nic nie idźcie**  
truly [nothing nothing that would follow it



Figure 13.8

By looking at her hand – something that Goffman (1963a) calls side involvement – the wife shows that her attention is now on an object other than the husband’s talk. Yet, as in Extract 1 above, the display of inattention also conveys negative stance toward the ongoing talk (Peräkylä et al., In review).

By investigating the moment-by-moment organization of interaction in particular contexts – such as couple therapy – we can start to see how inattention can sometimes, paradoxically, be an interactional event that serves interactional purposes. Goffman’s brilliant idea about the generic tendency toward alienation from interaction can serve as a starting point of analysis. The ensuing empirical work can tackle the variety of forms and contextual uses of inattention, uninvolvedness and disengagement.

## 7. Managing (in-)attention in public

In contrast to encounters, during which the interactants sustain together a single focus of attention, Goffman describes a variety of encounters in which people are physically present and take notice of each other but are engaged in different, individual activities and do not share a focus of attention. In Goffman’s terms, encounters of this type, for which the situation in a doctor’s waiting room may stand as an illustration, are called “unfocused interaction”. Cartier-Bresson’s following photo (Figure 13.9) is taken from the London stock exchange in 1955 and shows brokers in co-presence without joint attention.

Some brokers are standing still or walking, some are looking at a notebook or attending to a paper, and although they are in each other’s perceptual reach, they all gaze in different directions and none of them shares the focus of attention with others.

Whereas the concept “unfocused interaction” has as its frame of reference the formal organization of face-to-face-interaction, Goffman (1963a, p. 82ff) introduced an additional concept in order to capture a specific type



Figure 13.9 © Henri Cartier-Bresson © Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

of unfocused interaction. He observed that strangers who are in physical proximity or approach and pass each other do acknowledge the other's presence, but do so without mutual gaze or obtruding upon the other. They act in accordance with the principle of "civil inattention" (Goffman, 1963a, p. 83) which obliges strangers during an encounter neither to ignore nor to stare at one another. Instead, they should take notice of the other's existence and pay minimal attention to the other, just enough in order not to collide. Thus, their encounter can remain brief, wordless and un consequential. It is, in Goffman's (1963a, p. 84) words, "the slightest of interpersonal rituals (. . .) that constantly regulates the social intercourse of persons in our society".

The mutual disregard of the other's individual appearance and the recognition of the other's privacy is a characteristic feature of urban public life. It is here where strangers continuously meet strangers and where citizens have to get along with fellow citizens whom they don't know. In a famous essay already in 1903 Georg Simmel described the "blasé metropolitan attitude" of urban citizens. He diagnosed that city dwellers in public life show an "indifference" toward distinctions and individualities, and he argues that citizens adjust themselves to the city's overstimulating richness, speed and multitude of stimuli "by renouncing the response to them" (Simmel, 1972, p. 330). Whereas members of small communities curiously or anxiously direct their attention to strangers and unfamiliar events, inhabitants of modern cities adopt the detached perspective of civil inattention, for which strangers are 'no news' but insignificant and not worth further

attention. From here it is not surprising that the concept of civil inattention was taken up by urban sociologists (cf. Lofland, 1998, p. 29ff) but also resonates in Walter Benjamin's (2002) cultural-historical study of the figure of the flâneur, who strolls through the city, uninvolved, nonchalant, idle, without interest in business, sociability or fellow human beings. "The flanererie that began as art of the private individual ends today as necessity for the masses" (Benjamin, 2002, p. 895). In the figure of the flâneur it becomes visible that "civil inattention" does not mean disattention and ignorance, rather it captures the style of indifferent yet polite behavior that eases smooth social traffic in public spaces.

The maintenance of the attention order in encounters of strangers is endangered from two sides. On the one hand, actors can be – or can be perceived as – more intrusive than they are expected to be. On the other hand, individuals can act in ways or can have certain personal attributes with which they unintentionally attract the attention of the co-present others. Common practices to forestall and manage possible violations of the attentional order of public life have already been analyzed by Goffman in his book "Stigma" (1963b). Individuals who deviate in their appearance (e.g., defacements) or behavior (e.g., Tourette syndrome) from normal schemes apply techniques to appear inconspicuous to escape the attention of others. In the same way those who encounter a stigmatized individual can tactfully apply techniques to display inattention and to pretend disregard of the deviation. Thus, the interaction continues as if the stigmatized person is an individual with a normal appearance, and as if the other's attention has not been attracted by the deviation. Both interactants generate a pretense of normalcy through attention management and, thus, preserve their own self and the self of the other.

Civil inattention is not only at risk in the presence of "discreditable" (Goffman, 1963b, p. 41) individuals. Several ethnographic studies have shown that individuals regularly find themselves in situations where the protective shield of civil inattention is in danger of getting transgressed. In a crowded elevator the passengers are faced with "the automatism through which their bodies set interactions in motion" (Hirschauer, 2005, p. 62). In order to preserve civil inattention, the squeezed passengers turn their heads to the wall, look up at the ceiling or focus on the floor indicator. A contrastive setting to the congested elevator is situations where individuals can sit or wander around in a wide open space like in the waiting area of an airport. In such situations, individuals can be perceived as idle and are therefore prone to approaches and social initiatives. Common practices of individuals to display their unavailability involve averted body postures and, particularly, the avoidance of eye contact (D'Antoni et al., 2022). Individuals can furthermore show that they are busy and should therefore not be accessed by using media as "involvement shields" (Goffman, 1963a,

p. 38). By devoting themselves to their cell phones or typing intensively on their notebooks, individuals minimize their presence and stay below the radar of the others' attention (Ayaß, 2014).

Civil inattention is a widely respected principle of public behavior; in cases in which it is violated, people quickly tend to "normalize" the situation (Haddington et al., 2012). There are, however, also bold infringements, such as provocative male-female street remarks (Gardner, 1980) or cases in which bystanders and gazers gather around an accident and take pictures of the victims. Does that mean that the principle of civil inattention is weakening?

The ability to control one's impulses and to respect the others in their individual, even idiosyncratic existence can only develop under specific conditions and over a long period of time. By designating this attitude as "civil", Goffman has already hinted at its possible history and the obvious connection between the upcoming of the civil society and the formation of the norm of civil inattention. Not much is known, however, about the relation between the "process of civilization" (Elias, 1994) and the emergence of civil inattention as the mode in which public encounters between citizens should pass off. Some insights can be gained, for example, by Garland-Thomson's (2009) study of "staring", in which she shows, among other things, that staring was a tool of domination in racist societies and that therefore the development of "civil inattention" worked as an important lever for the establishment of racial equality. But a comprehensive cultural history of "civil inattention" is still to be written.

## 8. Conclusion

The social organization of attention is a theme that runs through Goffman's work, from the dissertation (Goffman, 1953) to the posthumous text *Interaction Order* (Goffman, 1983). Many, if not all, topics that he dealt with during his career were intertwined with the organization and management of attention: not only the fundamental discussions on focused and non-focused encounters, but likewise, issues related to face-work, presentation of self, stigma, frames and participation. Yet Goffman never brought together or thematized his insights and observations on attention.

Based on his 1960s writings that we have cited in this chapter, we suggest that Goffman's observations of attention, which he organized under the opposition between two types of encounters (*focused* and *unfocused*), could be better summarized as a three-fold field. First, there is the "full" focused interaction where the participants attend to each other and the physical and mental objects in the world. Second, there is what we have called the outward focused interaction: encounters where the participants share a focus in the world, are in co-presence, but do not display attention

to each other. Many public events fall into this category. And third, there is unfocused encounter, where the co-present participants do not share attention, neither between themselves nor to the objects in the world.

Yet, Goffman-inspired understanding of interaction does not primarily benefit from the refinement of his taxonomies, but rather can be advanced through a dynamic approach, where Goffman's focal phenomena – such as participation (see Goodwin & Goodwin, Wilkinson et al, and Mondada in this volume) – are seen as moment-by-moment transforming interactional achievements. The same applies to attention: what we need, and have also presented in this chapter, are studies on practices, trajectories and negotiations on attention management. Goffman gives us a general direction of what to look at, but not a systematic theory that we could add increments to.

From a conversation analytic perspective, attention can only be studied as attentiveness, as an aspect of embodied and situated action. In CA studies, gaze is often taken as a proxy of attention. The organization of gaze can be and is studied also “in its own right”, without explicit reference to the perceptual and cognitive process of attending (cf. Rossano, 2013). But as we have shown, gaze behavior is not the only mode of displaying attention. Attention is also communicated through touch, body activities and gestures; it is so deeply interwoven with all our senses and actions that its analysis is in need of a broader perspective. In the organization of attention, public actions, cognitive processes and the reading of displays of such processes overlap in ways that would call for further research in conversation analysis and beyond.

In his introduction to the book *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman, 1967), as well as in the posthumous paper *Interaction Order* (Goffman, 1983), Goffman pointed out that there is a psychobiological dimension in social interaction. Even though he maintained that in interaction research, “psychology is necessarily involved” (Goffman, 1967, p. 3), he never really specified what the psychology suited to interaction research could be. The organization of attention is one of the Goffmanian themes of interaction research that indeed has psychological underpinnings. Attention has to do with perception and organization of the perceivable objects into center and periphery. In this chapter, we summarized the developmental psychology of joint attention, finding not only parallels to Goffmanian themes, but also spotting issues where the developmental psychology of attention can suggest some clarifications to Goffman's themes. Along this way it may be possible to get a deeper understanding of the situatedness of attention and other modes of perceptual orientation within a communicative context.

One of the well-known characteristics of Goffman's work is his inclusiveness in choice of data: alongside systematic and non-systematic ethnographic observations, he used newspaper clippings, fiction, basically every

kind of representations of social interactions that he could get his hands on. In the empirical vignettes of this chapter, we have used artistic photographs alongside video recorded materials, and many studies that we cited were based on ethnography. Even though video is the gold standard in interaction studies, the study of attention seems to benefit from other materials, too. The events that need to be studied can be so scattered and wide reaching that video needs to be supplemented by other types of data.

In *Interaction Order* (Goffman, 1983) suggested that the basic structures of interaction are to a degree the same regardless of time, place and socio-historical context (see also Inglis in this volume); yet he also specified the ways in which they are “loosely coupled” to broader institutional structures. Our chapter suggests that the social organization of attention may be among aspects of interaction order that are particularly amenable to different socio-cultural contexts. Civil inattention, as a particular modern and urban ritualistic form of management of attention was a case in point. Yet, the Goffman-informed social history of attention still waits for its authors.

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