Goffman in Dixon. Ethnographer or Performer?
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Abstract

In this article I analyse a little-known part of Erving Goffman's production: his doctoral dissertation *Communication Conduct in an Island Community* (1953). I will consider in particular the methodological aspects of the research and the characteristics of the community studied.

The article aims at demonstrating how the methodological discussion of this early work is so accurate, extensive and consistent with the ethnographical canon of the time to allow deconstructing of two typical criticism moved to Goffman: a) the lack of transparency in the specification of the methods of data collection; and b) the loose relationship between data collection and theoretical argumentations (for a review see Lemert, 1997).

Keywords: Erving Goffman, ethnography, Emile Durkheim.

1. Introduction

Erving Goffman arrived in Unst in a cold and rainy day in December 1949. He came down of one of the twice-weekly boats connecting the island to the shores of Scotland[1], carrying a Leica camera and two heavy suitcases: the first, full of clothes and objects useful for the living room; the second, full

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[1] 'There is a twice-weekly steamboat contact between the mainland of Britain and Bergand, as well as daily air service' (Goffman 1953: 13). Bergand is the pseudonym Goffman used to indicate the Shetlands. All the following biographical information comes from Winkin (1988, 1999); Manning (1992); Smith (2006); and Shalin (2007-2017).

of books: novels and essays of French philosophers, studies of American and British social psychology, sociolinguistics, and anthropology. After sharing some words with the young boys of the island (Winkin, 1999), he headed towards the small village of Baltasound, named Dixon in the thesis.

In December 1949, Erving Goffman is a 27 years old Canadian scholar with a strong anthropological background, holding a PhD in Social Sciences at the University of Chicago. His supervisor, W. Lloyd Warner, has invited him to research on the stratification structure of the Shetlands[2]. Despite Warner's intentions, as soon as he arrived in Baltasound, Goffman changed his mind about the project and decided to conduct 'a study of conversational interaction… based on twelve months of field work carried on between December, 1949, and May, 1951[3], in a small community in Great Britain' (Goffman, 1953: 1). The resulting doctoral dissertation would be entitled *Communication Conduct in an Island Community*. The final document is 372 pages long and is divided in five main parts: The Context (I); The Sociological Model (II); On Information about One's Self (III); The Concrete Units of Conversational Communication (IV); and Conduct During Interplay (V). It would have been discussed and accepted at the University of Chicago on December 1953 despite the significant critical remarks of the board members. The final text differs substantially from the following *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, both from the earlier version published in Edinburgh in 1956 and the American version published in 1959, the book which made him famous throughout the world.

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[2] W. Lloyd Warner has been the first and formal Goffman's supervisor. Nevertheless, as one can read in the first note of his thesis, even Donald Horton and Anselm Strauss tutored his PhD dissertation (Goffman, 1953: 1, note 1). In the same note, Goffman explains how his research was financed and supported by the Department of Social Anthropology and by the Committee on Social Science Research of the University of Edinburgh. It is well known how Lloyd Weber helped Goffman to find a contact in the newly formed Department of Social Anthropology in Edinburgh directed by Ralph Piddington, an Australian social anthropologist Warner knew during his research on Aboriginals (Burns, 1992).

[3] Goffman stayed on the island for twelve out of seventeen consecutive months, moving from there to London where his old friend, the anthropologist Elizabeth Bott Spilius, moved from Chicago in the same period thanks to a fellowship offered by LSE (Bott Spilius, 2010). Probably, he also came back to the USA in the same period, as one can learn from the variety of biographical interviews collected by Dmitri Shalin (Shalin, 2007-2017).

The topic, the register and the approach are different from the canon of the Chicago School tradition[4]. *Communication Conduct* is not focussed on a single metropolitan area, as the totality of the First Chicago School's famous researches did. It is not *located* in a given time and space. Despite its ethnographical base, it purposes a general theory on conversation and impression management. It is not informed by a *pragmatist* and processual epistemology (Abbott, 1999, 2018). It is also different from the typical *community study* held by Lloyd Warner's research team: 'This is not the study of a community: it is a study that occurred *in* a community' (Goffman, 1953: 8). Still, it is informed by an ecological epistemology, as we will discuss later in the article.

Rather, in a Radcliffe-Brownian and Parsonsian fashion, Goffman's dissertation addresses a very general sociological question: how in ordinary situations people produce and reproduce a situated social order through conversation. In other words, he applies innovatively a communicative and micro-sociological approach to macrosociological phenomena.

The development of the argumentation is so extensive that it can be suggested that the thesis represents a sketch of all his *opera magna* for its anticipation of topics and perspectives further developed all over his career (see Goffman, 1959, 1961a, 1961b, 1967, 1968, 1974 and 1981): from rituals, to stigmatisation, to the topic of his last undelivered address, *The Interaction Order*.

Despite this evidence, the work has never been considered enough by Goffman's critical interpreters and readers, given also his unedited status[5]. Some of them confined the dissertation into the category of *early works*, paying minor attention to the contents and to the approach (Burns, 1992). Others (Pettit, 2011) interpreted *Communication Conduct* both as the first stage and as the preparatory background for the most famous following book on *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Almost missing is a methodological discussion of the research, save for Gregor Smith (2006) and Philip Manning

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[4] Smith (2006) and MacCannell (1990) suggested that the ethnography conducted by Goffman was a typical example of Chicagoan style. We do not agree with them, for the reasons expressed in the previous paragraphs. Other differences have to do with the absolute socio-cultural difference between the two contexts: 'a maelstrom of crime, capitalism and ethnic diversity [Chicago] set against a rapidly expanding and already huge urban landscape. Dixon, by contrast, was little more than a rock jutting out of the Atlantic, struggling to support about four hundred inhabitants' (Manning 2016: 108-9).

[5] Thanks to Dmitri Shalin who in 2007 published the webpage *Erving Goffman Archive*, since few years it has become possible to access a digital copy of the document at the following url: http://cdclv.unlv.edu/ega/documents/eg_phd.pdf.

(2016) who located *Communication Conduct* between the few big ethnographies Goffman conducted all over his life[6].

For reasons of length, in this article I will not discuss the large theoretical reflection Goffman conducted. Rather, I will focus on the methodological premises of his ethnographic research. The aim is to demonstrate how the methodological premises of Goffman's analysis are rooted in the orthodox tradition of *participant observation*, and to enlighten what is probably the only document where the sociologist discuss explicitly about his approach to the *fieldwork*[7].

2. Entering the fieldwork

The *Introduction* of the thesis leads us back to the arrival of Goffman in Dixon as a perfect stranger. Actually, the only strangers who used to visit the island were seamen docking at Shetlands from May to September 'exchang[ing] fish for money or fresh eggs', and a few tourists coming in the summer 'to fish for trout or watch birds for a week or two' (Goffman 1953: 22). Then, Goffman's figure was completely new and alien at the eyes of Dixoners. Consistently, entering *on* the fieldwork meant gradually reducing their perception of otherness: 'I settled down in the community as an American College student interested in gaining firsthand experience in the economics of island farming. Within these limits, I tried to play an unexceptional and acceptable role in community life. My real aim was to be an observant participant, rather than a participating observer' (Goffman 1953: 2).

The first sentence includes two elements of interest. First, the illustration of the kind of observation Goffman conducted. Presenting himself as a researcher interested in the *economics* of the island, rather than in the structure of *conversational interaction*, he conciliated overt research and semi-covert observation. In other words, the Canadian declared his role of researcher to the inhabitants of Dixon but did not fully explain his real research intentions. At a first sight, this choice could be intended as a technique of embarrassment-reduction as to favour the conveying of spontaneous data.

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[6] In addition, Robin Williams (1998) speaks of a *quasi-ethnographic focus* in the early Goffman's production.

[7] The only other reflection of this kind is the posthumous *On Fieldwork* (1989), the transcription of a talk Goffman gave to the Pacific Sociological Association during 1974, published 15 years later by the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. *On Fieldwork* is an informal *tricks of trade* discussion about ethnography, while, in my opinion, the doctoral dissertation has much more to say about Goffman's former rootedness to the ethnographic tradition.

But, it can also be considered as a matter of *grounded* change of mind. As a matter of fact, it is more than possible that Goffman's intellectual interests shifted during the seventeen months in and out of Dixon. As we will argue later, he discovered the incredible social, economic and cultural *homogeneity* of the island and *then* decided to conduct an analysis on the, let's say, *elementary forms* of social interaction. Consistently, the two former publications of his career – the articles 'Symbols of Class Status' (1951) and 'On Cooling the Mark Out' (1952), both published in the same period[8] – dealt with the intersection between status dynamics, social mechanisms and social psychology, all elements that could fit both with a research on microeconomics and with a research on social interactions.

The second sentence reveals a modern methodologically-reflexive attitude about the situated, located and constructed character of any ethnography. This is quite consistent with Strauss and Hughes' teachings and with the pragmatist tradition of the Chicago Founding Fathers (Dewey, Mead and Thomas) but that, nevertheless, remained quite undeveloped in the First Chicago School, during the Park-Burgess era (1915-1935).

Through the use of the adjectives 'unexceptional and acceptable', Goffman presented himself as a researcher interested in the *routines* of a given population\organization, but also as an investigator of the ordinary character of situated interaction.

But the peak of the climax is in the last sentence: 'My real aim was to be an observant participant, rather than a participating observer'. In the logical inversion of roles (*observer* vs. *participant*, i.e. stranger vs. member of the community) and qualifications (*participating* vs. *observant*, i.e. detached vs. engaged) Goffman offers, as his usual, an in-depth methodological stance coupled with a surprising linguistic joke. First and foremost, one can find in this approach the ethical imperative of the ethnographer who respects the community studied, participating to its life and activities, and reducing as more as possible the intrusiveness of his presence. Secondly, one can find an aspect of *validity*, i.e. the idea that the best way to understand properly the meanings and functions of some observed behaviour, one has to *go native*[9] or at least to become *reflexive* (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) about his role on the fieldwork. The claim is that to depict and analyse ordinary activities *given for granted,* one has to disappear to the eyes of the interactants[10], she\he has to become, in

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[8] 'Symbols of Class Status' was published on the *British Journal of Sociology*, during his stay in Scotland in 1951.

[9] For a critical discussion about *native anthropology*, see Narayan (1993).

[10] 'In order to observe people off their guards, you must first win their trust [...]. In order to learn what the right questions where, I had to become taken for granted by

turn, a given for granted element of the social environment. We could decide here how much this claim was honest. We will discuss about it in the conclusions.

3. Observing

In short, the entrance of Goffman *on* the fieldwork followed his entrance *in* the fieldwork (Goffman 1989). Solved this problem, in any ethnography a second big issue follows: *what* to observe?

Goffman's research question was actually quite general and difficult to be defined. The strategy he adopted to decide what to observe in order to understand how social order works in interpersonal communication was twofold. First, he pursued a principle of 'full range of variation', i.e. he tried to observe as many diverse situations as possible, 'i.e., meals, types of work, schooling, shop-loitering, weddings, parties, socials, funerals'. A large part of those situations will disappear from the *Presentation* and will remain largely unknown by Goffman's readers. Secondly, as any good ethnographer does, he participated to the more redundant part of the community life, i.e. social rituals and social occasions, describing accurately the sociography of the participants, and the basic features of time and space.

In brief, the Goffman who becomes native throws himself into the practices of the island, frequents all the most important places and activities, marries the native lifestyle, and tries to win the trust of the inhabitants. He plays billiards every Monday and Saturday with the men of the island[11], takes part to the social reunions[12], lends a hand in the fields of crofters, enters as a welcome guest in their houses, frequents a certain number of key informants: the retired postman, a couple of local elders (the already mentioned Mr. and Mrs. Wren), the Protestant shepherd, and so on. In this sense, the research design of his ethnography is consistent with the already mentioned canon of

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the community to the degree and in a way that made it unsuitable for me to ask these [formal] questions' (Goffman, 1953: 5).

[11] 'The study is particularly concerned with three of the social settings in which events of this kind regularly occurred: socials, billiards, and the hotel' (Goffman, 1953: 22-23).

[12] The socials were fests held once a month from September to March in the Dixon Community Hall. They consisted of various entertainments like whist, dances, bring and buy sale and involved a large part of the community: from 60 to 100 attendees per time.

Radcliffe-Brownian structural anthropology[13]. However, Goffman shows also an interest for work activities and for the dynamic of distinction and communication with the external space, consistent with the teachings of Ernest Burgess and Everett Hughes, as the last part of the following quotation shows:

> My attempt to ensure range and depth of participation was facilitated by two fortunate social facts. Much of the creational live in the community is formally organized as an undertaking open to any resident of the island, and there is a strong tradition of neighbourly assistance with farm tasks, whereby offers to help are readily accepted and give to the helper a traditional right to eat a day's meals with those he has helped (Goffman, 1953: 3).

Most of all, he observes and records all the happenings between persons 'regardless of how uninteresting and picayune[14] these events seemed then to be'. His choice derives from a precise theoretical paradigm: that of social ecology (Park and Burgess, 1921; see for a critical review Gaziano, 1996). Under this perspective, the researcher was asked to explain a given process of social action, through the observation and *formalization* of the typical patterns of behaviours spread in a given community\organization\social group: 'The assumption was that all interaction between persons took place in accordance with certain patterns, and hence, with certain exceptions, there was no *prima facie* reason for thinking that one event was a better or worse expression of this patterning that any other event' (Goffman, 1953: 3).

Pattern is clearly the object here, not *agency*. In this sense, Goffman is also methodologically nearest to the old Parkian social ecology than to what Blumer later labelled as Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969). But, of course, in comparison with the Founding Fathers, this text is quite more engaged in a rationalization and justification of methods (see Conclusions).

Furthermore, he collects a variety of so-called *chance data*, i.e. the description of events that happen in daily life without their occurrence being predictable beforehand (Tzanne, 2000), and for which it is therefore required a prolonged observation. And, as he declares, tries also to vary experimentally the presence and interaction of different social factors

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[13] Erving Goffman discovered both Radcliffe-Brown and Durkheim thanks to the anthropologist Ray Birdwhistell, whose courses Goffman attended during his BA in Sociology at Toronto.
[14] The use of this term, instead of the quite more common *trivial*, show how refined the Goffman's prose was.

> Here the aim was threefold: to minimize for at least some islanders the inhibitory effect of having a stranger present; to ensure observation of the kinds of interaction crises which occur infrequently but which throw light on conduct which occurs regularly; and, finally, to ensure observation of occasions in which factor usually present were for some reason absent, thus providing a makeshift way of experimentally varying one factor while keeping others constant (Goffman, 1953: 2-3).

From a technical point of view, the longer Goffman stayed on the fieldwork the more he renounced to take notes openly. Rather, he preferred to behave naturally, undertaking those kinds of occupations which gave him direct access to the life of the island avoiding the biases of mechanical devices[15]. He rather trusted on his memory and on the good relationships he developed with locals[16].

Again, the longer he stayed on the fieldwork the better he understood that he had not focused on '…men and their moments. Rather, moments and their men' as a few years later he would have said (Goffman, 1967). It is in Dixon that Goffman discovers the need of analysing routines and not events. Here, as any ethnographer in the field, he faced the issue of banality and variety of observations, a problem emphasized by his theoretical interest for the recursive forms of social behaviour. But, he faced brilliantly this methodological puzzle, renouncing to the temptations of *self-confirmation* and *tellingness* and keeping on observing 'the normal', the routines, the given for granted:

> There was a constant temptation to record only those events which found at the time a neat place in my conceptual organization, either confirming or radically disconfirming instances. […] There was also a temptation to concentrate on those events which struck me as bizarre, dramatic, or entertaining events likely to make a reader feel that the data were interesting and meaningful. (Goffman, 1953: 4).

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[15] 'Mechanical devices such as tape recorders and motion picture cameras, or rigid techniques such as time-sampling, would have provided a desirable check on this recording biases. These corrective devices, however, were not practical for social, economic, and technical reasons' (Goffman, 1953: 4).

[16] 'During the first few months of the study, it was possible for me to take a running record at large-scale gatherings, noting down verbatim bits of conversation and gestures, and sketching ecological movements, as these events occurred. Later, and especially in the case of small-scale gatherings, recording of this kind would have been considered offensive, improper and inconsistent with relationships that I had established. It then became necessary to record daily observations at the end of each day or at moments of privacy during the day' (Goffman, 1953: 3).

4. Interpreting

Communication Conduct's *Introduction* includes also an interesting reflection about the interpretation of data. Largely anticipating Geertz's discussion about *thin* and *thick interpretation* (Geertz, 1973), Goffman tried to answer to two different questions: how to understand whether an interpretation is right or wrong? And how to use data as means of theoretical construction?

As far as the first problem was concerned, again Goffman was aware of the partiality of his point of view on reality and addressed it mainly through *restitution*: sharing his interpretation with locals. But also remarking the *informal sanctions* of relational matter deriving from mistakes:

> By being present with some – and only some – of the participants before and after an observed interaction occurred, it was possible to confirm and disconfirm my own interpretations and reactions by asking leading questions and by conversations of the preparatory and post-mortem kind. […] Errors on my part were corrected by means of informal sanctions administered by members of the community themselves; correct observations was rewarded by increasing permission to participate informally and by and increasing capacity to know what was likely to happen next and to react appropriately (Goffman, 1953: 6-7).

Finally, a central point: the relationship between empirical data and theoretical construction. Reading all the dissertation, Goffman seem to forecast the critics of his professors in Chicago and of his future readers. He knows that, at first sight, his dissertation could seem like a theoretical complex and articulated construction, supported only occasionally by empirical data, without any clear link of argumentation and validation between concepts and data. He tried to escape somehow this problem, suggesting that the data came before the concept, despite that the text was a simplified and theoretically oriented explanation of human behaviour: '[A] false impression is sometimes given that the field data has been brought in as an afterthought, merely to illustrate concepts earlier arrived at. I should like to make it quite clear that the terms and concepts employed in this study came after and not before the facts' (Goffman, 1953: 9).

But, he did not explain how much of the theoretical outcomes derived from the empirical observation and how much from an argumentative deduction. In our opinion, in this statement Goffman is not holding such a defensive tone, rather he is showing his typical debunking attitude. He deals with a topic that tended to remain largely unexpressed in much of the sociological literature published at that time. It would be only with Strauss and

Glaser's *Discovery of the Grounded Theory* (1967) that the fictional research design of mainstream sociology would have been put in discussion.

5. Insularity and homogeneity

A final methodological remark needs to be introduced about the physical and social characteristics of the fieldwork, as they are crucial to understand how Goffman's study of daily life developed in a functionalist-dramaturgical study of interaction order.

The Shetlands had very little vegetation[17] and 'for their size these communities [were] probably the most isolated in Britain' (Goffman, 1953: 14-15). Dixon was actually a gated community, whose physical and social boundaries allowed Goffman to analyse experimentally social interactions involving completely and continuously individual's social reputation. The three hundred dwellers lived in a condition of continuous mutual presence. Their selves could never escape the look of the others, neither when at home either. Every house faced directly any other neighbour's house. The social structure was elementary: the village had a single pier, a single doctor, a single bakery and pastry shop, a single bazaar, and a single school[18]. Play and social activities were limited and concentrated in small venues.

A fundamental characteristic of the group studied was also its complete racial, economic and cultural homogeneity: 'The three hundred residents of Dixon are all white, Protestant (of three different denominations) and most of them have lived on the island for a number of generations higher than a man without special interests can trace' (Goffman, 1953: 15). Each house had the same size, its own garden and small farm[19]. The biggest division was between literates and illiterates. However, there were only two gentry and erudite families, both of whom came from the British motherland. All others, save for a few professionals living in a more privileged situation, had an absolutely comparable status.

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[17] 'The island grows not quite enough grass to feed the stock and not quite enough vegetables to feed the inhabitants' (Goffman 1953: 14).

[18] 'The only bakery on the island is attached to the principal Dixon store. This store is of the "general" kind; it is the largest on the island and to some extent provides and informal social center for all three communities. The island's chief business family, its sole practising doctor, and its resident "squire" all live in Dixon' (Goffman, 1953: 15).

[19] 'The average crofter has four or five cows and a score of ponies […] The size of individual holdings is limited by government policy that is apparently designed to encourage land cultivation by individual family units. There are only three agricultural holdings on the island that make use of a full-time hired hand' (Goffman, 1953: 14).

A crucial point for ethnographic observations was of course the Springfield Hotel, the only facility that had contact with the outside world, and the place where the management of impressions was most important, given the class inequality between British customers and local staff[20]. Goffman sojourned there during the first two months of his stay, then to rent the cottage immediately behind. After he moved to the cottage, he started working at the hotel as a part-time dishwasher and to eat there as a customer[21]. This allowed him to have a double point of view on the activities of the restaurant: sometimes as a kitchen staff, sometimes as a customer.

His second fundamental focus was on the domestic sphere. In the elementary social structure of Dixon, the household represented the main social unit. Each one had a 'neighbourhood circle', consisting of the four or five crofts that immediately surrounded it. 'Each still had a "kin circle", consisting of the close relations, affinal and lineal, of the male and the female heads of the household' (Goffman, 1953: 19). These two social unites were characterised – says Goffman – by 'mutual aid and informal social intercourse'.

6. Conclusions: can we believe in Goffman?

In conclusion, the Canadian sociologist arrived in Dixon as an outsider and managed to be accepted by an extremely cohesive and homogeneous community, where everybody was extremely exposed to the reciprocal social control. The Dixoners shared with him much of the Western, Anglo-Saxon culture but differed from the 'American College student' for a lifestyle as far as possible from the complexity, the pluralism and the individualism of Chicago.

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[20] 'The immediate presence of middle and upper-class guests serves the entire staff as a learning situation for approved patterns of conduct. The hotel serves in this way as a center of diffusion for higher class British values' (Goffman, 1953: 30).

[21] 'During the first two months of the study… I stayed in the hotel in the capacity of a guest and took my meals with the Wrens and all occasional hotel guests at a small dining room table. When the Wrens moved, I moved into a vacant cottage, returning to the hotel kitchen for meals with the staff. I ate one meal with them almost every weekday for six months. During a summer I also worked part time in the hotel scullery as second dishwasher. It was therefore possible to make a long series of mealtime observations both as a guest of the hotel and as a member of its kitchen staff, in this way getting two different views of the same process' (Goffman, 1953: 30-31).

This, at least, is how Goffman presented himself in the role of ethnographer and PhD student to the limited audience of his doctoral board. The methodological reflection we mentioned in this article showed a deep understanding of Burgess' and Hughes' teachings, and a form of negotiation between Lloyd Warner's expectations and Goffman's real activity of research. Indeed, in *Communication Conduct*, Goffman went beyond Chicago tradition, and managed to conciliate various methodological and theoretical backgrounds: Radcliffe-Brownian anthropology, Parsonsian social system, Durkheimian sociology, Freudian psychoanalysis, Sartrian existentitalism, pragmatist sociolinguistics, and more.

His research design was at the same time canonical and innovative. Canonical in the access to the fieldwork, the reduction of intrusiveness, and the choice of the activities to be observed and of informants. Innovative in the anticipation of the use of some techniques of qualitative data collection such as chance data, shadowing, self-ethnography and double-role-perspective ethnography.

But, one can ask: how far was it for real? Or, in other words, how far can we believe in Goffman's claims? This is a question that others have already faced, discussing the potential fictional status of Goffman's refined theoretical and empirical findings (Jacobsen, 2010; Pettit, 2011).

Following what Gary Allan Fine wrote in his *Ten Lies of Ethnography* (1993), Goffman could be believed to indulge in his dissertation in 'claims, assumptions, and rationalizations about the method' as '[h]umans have unlimited abilities to justify their action through moral discourse' (Fine 1993: 268-269). But this is a question that more or less regards all ethnographical writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986).

Considering the situation – Goffman's career early stages –, it can also be thought that he assumed, from time to time, the defensive tone of the PhD student presenting his dissertation to the board of one of the most influential schools of Sociology in the world.

Of course, we are not in the condition to understand how far Goffman was sincere or not in this writing. We presented a number of proves on how Goffman was able to understand Dixonian social system and entering in the routines of the dwellers of the village. We also showed the accuracy and depth of Goffman's early methodological reflection. Still, it is not possible to define where and when fiction begins and where and when reality (or validity, in methodological terms) fades. Indeed, the epiphanic but ambiguous and intriguing character of Goffman's theorizations is one of the reasons of his large success. As he explained in some of the most famous pages of the *Presentation*, sincerity and insincerity coexist in any representation, academic writing included.

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