Re(dis)covering Goffman: Disability, 'deference' and 'demeanour' in a community café

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Abstract

Erving Goffman's scholarship has been subject to intense critique in disability studies. Goffman's account of 'stigma', in particular, is viewed as being antithetical to its driving principles, namely: to depart from deficit configurations of disability; to define disability as embedded in rigid and oppressive social structures; and to recognise more positive accounts of disability. In this article, I discuss the value of Goffman's work for understanding the social worlds of disabled people. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at a community café run by learning-disabled adults and non-disabled adults, I use Goffman's neglected concepts of 'deference' and 'demeanour' to explore how learning-disabled adults are afforded respect, or not, in this space. I sketch out how mundane encounters – taking orders, making drinks, serving customers – are carefully accomplished in ways that accord deference to café team members and reassert their humanity and value. At the same time, I capture how customers, on occasion, do not act with deference, nor display 'good' demeanour. In such moments, their conduct – whereby team members are ignored, disregarded or framed as charitable subjects – animates deficit scripts of disability. To conclude, I argue that Goffman's insights provide the machinery for demonstrating how learning-disabled adults' interactions with (non-disabled) others must be central to an analysis of their lives.

Keywords

disability, ethnography, Goffman, social theory, symbolic interactionism

Introduction

Scholars located in, or loosely affiliated with, disability studies[1] have criticised Goffman's work (Fine & Asch, 1988; Wendell, 1996), and particularly his landmark book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Goffman, 1963), as a framework for

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understanding the lives of disabled people. For instance, Gleeson (1999, p. 17) decries Goffman's fixation on the interaction order; the 'interactionist fallacy', Gleeson argues, glosses over structural forces underwriting and conditioning personal encounters and their meanings for disabled people. This mirrors appraisals about Goffman's politically naïve comprehension of how interactions are shaped by social and cultural contexts (Abberley, 1993). For Grinker (2020), Goffman's ahistorical analysis assumes stigma and the need for its management. This disempowering conjecture about the unyielding clutch of stigma casts disabled people as passive and victimised (Farrugia, 2009), and allocates responsibility for managing it to individuals who are expected to accommodate others' anticipations (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). According to Oliver (1990), an interactionist focus on self-management, along with not explaining why stigma occurs and where it comes from, validates the status quo and leaves an unjust world intact.

Tyler (2018, p. 753) similarly claims that, when it comes to disability, we must study the political economy of stigma as a 'technology of disablement which stratifies people along a differential axis of in/humanity'. Another restriction of Goffman's analysis, for Tyler, is his normative assumptions and lack of attention to the notion of 'normality'. Titchkosky (2000, p. 209) suggests Goffman, as well as positioning himself and readers as 'we normals', 'constructs disabled persons as unexpected and unintended persons and it constructs normal persons as, indeed, quite normal when they understand disabled persons as such'. Normalcy, in Goffman's work, is 'the unmarked site from which people view the stigma of disability', yet he does not unpack this (Titchkosky, 2000, p. 204), nor does he consider how disabled people may not be wed to the same 'identity norms' as 'normals' (Barnes & Mercer, 2003, p. 8). Goffman's work, in turn, is seen as rubbing against the driving principles of disability studies: to depart from deficit narratives; to define disability as embedded in faulty and oppressive social structures; and to recognise more positive and resistive accounts of disability.

However, other scholars writing about disability laud Goffman's concepts (especially 'stigma') or, at least, have used them in ways that appear to signify their utility (Ablon, 1984; Cahill & Eggleston, 1994; Winance, 2007). Indeed, some argue that critics have fundamentally misunderstood Goffman's intentions (Shuttleworth, 2004), including his understanding of 'stigma' as being interactionally accomplished. Healey and Titchkosky (2022, p. 243) suggest that disability studies scholars should attend to stigma, much like Goffman, as a social production; it is not 'found', but 'made' in the episodic staging of everyday life (Michalko, 1998). For Healey and Titchkosky (2022), disability studies is too quick to write off Goffman's contribution, despite it being useful for tracing the 'interactional *making* of disability as an unwanted and degraded difference' (p. 243, original emphasis). By establishing a dynamic connection between disability studies and Goffman, they argue that we can 'show the stigma process at work in the production of disability' and '[free] disability from the oppressive grip of taken-for-granted (normal) conceptions of it' (Healey & Titchkosky, 2022, pp. 242, 245).

Likewise, Barnartt (2016, p. 34) claims that Goffman's emphasis on stigma as an interactional phenomenon recognises people's 'power to conform to, challenge, modify, resist, or reject the identity being applied by the other actor'. Suggestions that Goffman rejects disabled people's agency are based on misinterpretations and oversimplifications of his work.[2] As Susman (1994, p. 16) argues, whilst some criticisms of Goffman's work are fair, they do not undo its 'fundamental validity' for understanding disabled people's

lives: it is 'not the functional limitations of impairment which constitute the greatest problems faced by disabled individuals, but rather societal and social responses to it'.

Whilst some disability studies scholars convey an ambivalent and complicated reading of Goffman's work (Green, 2016; Wan, 2003), others recognise possible convergences between it and disability studies (Brune & Garland-Thomson, 2014). Even so, my intention is not to respond to each critique or celebration of Goffman's work. Instead, I offer two reflections. First, such evaluations of Goffman are seldom grounded in sturdy empirical foundations. Second, they attend almost exclusively to *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963). This is despite the abundance of concepts introduced across his various works. Goffman's conceptual net is cast far and wide, with several ideas drifting into the water never to be recovered. Yet, he was committed to his intellectual project of attending to the minutiae of everyday life: 'Goffman may have changed his terms, but he rarely changed his tune' (Strong, 1988, p. 228). My contention, thus, is that we should consider what his other concepts (i.e. not only 'stigma') can offer in terms of making sense of disabled people's lived experiences. This is a very rare undertaking.[3]

In this article, I identify Goffman's (1956, 1967) concepts of 'deference' (i.e. the ways in which appreciation is readily conveyed to others) and 'demeanour' (i.e. behaviour expressing to others that a person is of a 'desirable' kind) as concepts which remain overlooked in the sociological canon – and even by advocates of Goffman[4] – but offer a valuable apparatus for interpreting the social world of my research site: a community café run by learning-disabled adults and non-disabled adults based in the UK. This is appropriate since disabled people have historically faced an affronting array of social and environmental barriers in public spaces (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Goodley, 2014; Schillmeier, 2007). There is a strong legacy of disabled people being excluded from, and struggling to validate their presence in, public environments, where non-disabled others can dictate and regulate their sense of belonging, safety and inclusion. Drawing upon Goffman's work, I explore how interactions between learning-disabled adults and adults without learning disabilities play out in a space ('the café') designed to be a safe and inclusive haven for the former. I explore how mundane encounters in the café are accomplished in ways that afford respect, dignity and personhood to learning-disabled adults. At the same time, I show how customers, on occasion, do not act with deference nor display 'good' demeanour. In such moments, their conduct aligns with a deficit scripting of disability, with team members discounted and figured as charitable subjects. In so doing, I argue that Goffman's insights provide the machinery for showing how learning-disabled adults' interactions with (non-disabled) others must be central to an analysis of their lives.

Deference and demeanour

Goffman (1983) argues that people participate in traffic rules of interaction as a type of social system. Interaction is orderly based upon shared normative presuppositions and self-sustained restraints, and this shared focus provides the conditions for the intimate coordination of action. Goffman (1956, 1967) sketches out this mutuality of interaction in his essay 'The Nature of Deference and Demeanor'. Referring to Durkheim's 'theory of the soul', Goffman claims that the ritualistic religious ceremonies described by

Durkheim are observable in polite acts of everyday interaction. Goffman (1956, p. 473) suggests, in social encounters, people are allotted 'a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts'. These symbolic acts are evident in rules of conduct that, as a guide for action, 'infuse all areas of activity and are upheld in the name and honour of almost everything' (Goffman, 1956, p. 473). An attachment to rules produces a constancy and patterning of behaviour, creating both obligations (how one behaves) and expectations (how others are bound to act in relation to that person). When acts are perceived by others, they carry ceremonial meaning. Such ceremonial activity contains certain basic components, two of which are what Goffman calls 'deference' and 'demeanour'.

Goffman conceptualises deference as the ways in which appreciation is conveyed to others: it constitutes a way to celebrate and confirm a relation to another person. Individuals may desire deference, but it must be received. This implies a 'sentiment of regard' for a recipient and delivers a promise of sorts; it is an 'avowal and pledge to treat the recipient in a particular way in the on-coming activity' (Goffman, 1956, p. 480). Deference takes many forms, but can be grouped into what Goffman calls 'avoidance rituals' and 'presentation rituals'. The former involves a person keeping a distance from someone to sidestep violating the 'ideal sphere' (Simmel, 1950, p. 321) around the other. For Goffman, this might include avoiding topics which are painful, embarrassing or humiliating to someone. Presentation rituals, in contrast, occur when a person makes 'specific attestations to recipients concerning how [they regard] them and how [they] will treat them in the oncoming interaction' (Goffman, 1956, p. 485). Presentation rituals include salutations, invitations, compliments and minor services (e.g. helping people), which highlight the interpersonal and reciprocal nature of social occasions.

In contrast to deference, Goffman (1956, p. 489) describes demeanour as ceremonial behaviour expressing to others that a person is of a 'desirable' kind and is, therefore, deserving of others' deference. To acquire deference, a person must demonstrate the appropriate demeanour to others. Goffman argues that 'in our society' (referring in general to North America), a 'demeaned' person expresses attributes including sincerity and discretion, modesty, and self-control over emotions and desires. A demeaned person, then, can be relied on to be an appropriate interactant, so long as others in the scene accept how people handle themselves. Such attributes, Goffman (1956) claims, cannot be self-claimed, since the image erected is not for a person's 'own eyes' (p. 489).

According to Goffman, the concepts of deference and demeanour offer a mechanism for appreciating the ceremonial and collective order of social life: 'individuals must hold hands in a chain of ceremony, each giving deferentially with proper demeanour to the one on the right what will be received deferentially from the one on the left' (Goffman, 1956, p. 493). There are passing references to deference and demeanour in singular areas of enquiry (e.g. Birrell, 1981; Brossard, 2019; Hallett, 2003), though some offer a more extensive engagement (Johnson, 2018; Scott, 2009; Zelner, 2015). Outside of this scholarship, there is little to no attention afforded to Goffman's concepts and how they can help us to understand contemporary arrangements. Here, I use deference and demeanour – and, occasionally, concepts and ideas from Goffman's wider body of work – to make sense of the social world of a café run by learning-disabled adults and non-disabled adults.

Using Goffman's work, based on observations of a psychiatric hospital, risks careless conflations between disability and mental illness. My intention, like Goffman, is not to claim that disability/mental illness are equal ('deviant) categories or, via this empirical case, that learning-disabled adults fail to meet the standards of the ceremonial order and, as such, are stigmatised. Rather, I use Goffman's insights to sketch out how the ceremonial order, whilst often misunderstood as holding little meaning, is the glue of social order in the café. I show how mundane moments – taking orders, making drinks, serving customers – are key for including learning-disabled adults in the ceremonial order. What is more, I show how denying participation in this ceremonial order – for example, by ignoring learning-disabled adults and/or figuring them as charitable subjects – is to commit a grievous act against them.

Research site: The café

The research site was a pop-up community café run by learning-disabled adults ('team members') and non-disabled adults ('coordinators' or 'supporters'; I use the term 'coordinator' in this article). The café is a light space in a church-based community centre. There are around 20 tables, each with four chairs, and a single counter where customers place their order. Team members and coordinators are distinguishable by a uniform inscribed with the café's name. Learning-disabled team members, many of whom have physical (visible) impairments, are young adults, whilst the coordinators are all adults aged 40+. The main intentions of the café are to provide opportunities to young learning-disabled adults, to celebrate diversity, and to offer a space for friendship, belonging and inclusion.

I approached the café in late 2022 about undertaking a project with them. After visiting the café and discussing my proposed project with several gatekeepers, we agreed I would begin fieldwork in January 2023. All team members and coordinators were sent easy-read information sheets and consent forms, and a video providing information on the project, prior to my first visit. Potential participants could then tell a coordinator, or me, if they would like to take part (they had more than 24 hours to decide). Consent could be verbal or signed. All team members and coordinators consented to the study. Whilst I did not encounter major problems during the project, there were challenges with attempting to work 'inclusively', particularly around notions of collaboration, consent and 'voice'. I explore this at length elsewhere (Thomas, 2024).

Fieldwork was undertaken over a one-year period alongside team members and coordinators, who took orders, made drinks and served drinks and/or baked goods to customers. This amounted to around 60 hours of fieldwork (café shifts were once a week for two to three hours; I did fieldwork once a fortnight on average). Fieldwork was undertaken with seven coordinators and 12 learning-disabled adults, though shifts were ordinarily with approximately four coordinators and between six and eight learning-disabled adults. Ethnographic observation was selected as my primary method for two main reasons. First, this was recommended by gatekeepers at the café. Other methods (e.g. questionnaires and/or interviews) were singled out as inappropriate for certain team members. They urged me instead to 'work alongside' team members and coordinators, which would also avoid disturbing the café's normal rhythms and routines. Second, I was

guided by an interest in producing an in-depth description of the café and how learning-disabled adults interacted with other team members, coordinators and customers.

My data analysis approach aligned with Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) 'abductive' approach to qualitative data analysis. This involves maintaining a constant dialogue between existing scholarship and collected data. I read fieldnotes alongside theoretical and empirical contributions to '[add] surprising pieces to the puzzle' (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 177). Such an iterative process meant that analysis was a constant task, rather than something left to the conclusion of the project. I started research with broad interests – informed by theoretical and empirical material from sociology, disability studies and beyond – that helped to shape and refine the research and, subsequently, the analysis. The project received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

It was clear during my fieldwork that 'systems of enabling conventions', which function in a similar way to 'ground rules for a game', guided the interaction order at the café (Goffman, 1983, p. 5). Everyone upheld a social consensus: people were expected to follow rules of conduct that secured the honour and sacredness of both them and others (Goffman, 1956). From here, I describe moments where: (1) deference was accorded to learning-disabled adults; (2) deference was not accorded to learning-disabled adults; and (3) how moments of transgression are managed by team members.

Doing deference and demeanour

Many team members reflected positively on their role at the café. Kat (team member) 'really enjoys' herself there, whilst for Bruce (team member), the café provided a space to 'make new friends' and 'to tell customers who I am':

> They're friendly customers, not nasty ones. I've got anxieties. I get upset very easily. It doesn't happen here . . . Any problems, I can talk to staff as well. My team members are lovely, really friendly. I'm relaxed now. I can be myself.

During fieldwork, Lauren (coordinator) said 'working shoulder-to-shoulder' not only reflected that 'everybody has a skillset and limitations', but also provided a vehicle for learning-disabled adults to improve 'self-esteem' and foster 'a sense of community':

> It's not actually about the coffee and cake. It's about making sure that people, all people, feel valued and have a place in the community to come and work, learn, and be part of something.

For Maria (coordinator), the café is a 'safe place' where people can 'have a chat and get support', a 'little world' in which people 'look out' and 'care for each other'. It is also a space for dismantling problematic scripts of disability; 'you need to have more of this sort of thing that's immersing them to make people realise that [disabled people are] a name, they're a person, it's not just their disability'. It was clear during fieldwork that team members, coordinators and customers worked together, and in mundane ways, to accomplish a sense of community, to disassemble sticky assumptions of disability, and to recognise the value and personhood of learning-disabled adults. This was clear, for instance, when customers ordered a drink:

Mark [team member] asks the customer what they would like to order. Lauren [coordinator] notices this and moves to stand to the side of Mark. Mark repeats the order back to the customer as he writes it on a sticky note. The writing looks, to me, like a series of illegible scribbles. Lauren takes the sticky note from Mark once the customer has finalised their order. As Mark records the order on the phone (to calculate the price), Lauren writes down 'cappuccino' and 'cup of tea' underneath Mark's writing. She does this on the counter behind Mark, out of his sight. Once this is done, Lauren helps Mark to record the order on the phone, returning the sticky note next to Mark. Mark, reading the phone, tells the customer the cost. The customer places the money on the counter and Mark opens the money box. Mark initially hesitates. Sensing this, Lauren tells Mark what coins are needed for the customer's change. The customer takes the change and thanks Mark before leaving. Mark places the note on the back counter and shouts, in the direction of Naomi [coordinator] and Nathan [team member], 'I have an order for you: a cappuccino and tea'. (Fieldnotes)

Such a café encounter was typical. Both coordinators and team members emphasised the importance of learning-disabled adults taking orders, albeit with assistance where required. When I asked Lauren why she rewrote orders out of Mark's sight, she replied:

We feel it's really important for Mark's self-worth that he wants to take the orders. He understands what he's writing. That's the most important thing . . . I think it's really important that the customer knows that it's Mark who's taking the order and it's really important that Mark knows that he is taking the order.

Another time Lauren told me that asking Mark, and others, to take orders was to not 'deskill' team members, who were encouraged to take, make and serve orders. Café customers also appeared to buy into such treatment during orders:

A customer gives Kat [team member] £7 to pay for their order. Kat picks up the phone to record the sale but hesitates. Kat then types in '£5.00', in the view of Naomi [coordinator] and the customer. The customer, who is looking directly at the phone (and assumedly sees the wrong amount of money being entered), does not say anything. After a few seconds, Kat says to Naomi, 'is this right?' Naomi replies 'the customer has paid £7 so you to put 700 into the phone'. The customer does not engage verbally or nonverbally with Naomi. The customer's head is slightly bowed, until Kat presses 700 and then 'OK', thus concluding the order. The customer smiles, says 'thank you', and returns to their table. (Fieldnotes)

Throughout this encounter, the customer engaged entirely with Kat and refrained from interfering when the wrong amount of money was entered. During orders, coordinators and customers regularly circumvent an intervention – as an 'avoidance ritual' (Goffman, 1956) – until ostensibly requested by the team members. There was also a recognition from customers that it may take team members time to take, complete and deliver orders (Starbucks and Costa Coffee, popular coffeehouse chains in the UK, were frequently named as contrasting examples to the café for this reason).[5] For example, one team member, Eric, said:

That's what I like as well [at the café]. I get to be myself around other people rather than if I was working in a café on my own. People understand that I might be a little bit slow with the coffees and that.

It was clear coordinators, team members and customers worked together to ensure that learning-disabled adults felt in control of, and respected in, café encounters. This was a mode of 'deference' (Goffman, 1956, 1967), as was giving team members praise when they completed various tasks:

> Maria [coordinator] asks Mason [team member] 'can you help me with two hot cross buns please, Mason?' Mason nods. Facing the back counter, Maria asks Mason to place jam in two dishes. Mason picks up the teaspoon and places a blob of jam in each dish. 'Well done, Mason, that's great, thanks', Maria says, as she gently places her hand on Mason's shoulder. Mason smiles. Graham [team member], who is standing next to us, exclaims 'I'm going to clean some dishes in the kitchen'. After a few minutes pass, Maria asks me and Lauren [coordinator], 'Is Graham still in the kitchen? I'll go and make sure he's alright.' As Maria and I walk to the kitchen, Graham is smiling whilst holding a tea towel. 'I've done it', he announces proudly. Maria replies 'you've done all the washing up yourself?' 'Uh-huh', Graham replies. Maria smiles. 'Great job, Graham! We'll have to tell Lauren!' Graham walks excitedly toward Lauren who is standing behind the counter. 'I did the washing up on my own', Graham says to Lauren. 'Did you? That's amazing!', she replies. Lauren raises a hand to high-five Graham, which he reciprocates. (Fieldnotes)

Providing praise and compliments at the café acted as a 'presentation ritual' (Goffman, 1956), where specific attestations are made to the team members. 'Avoidance rituals' were equally at play here: coordinators and customers did not perform tasks *for* team members. Rather, team members (sometimes with assistance) did tasks themselves – and coordinators stressed the need to act with 'discretion' and uphold the 'ideal sphere' (Simmel, 1950) of team members. This is possible by 'facilitating' (Lauren, coordinator) team members, working 'shoulder-to-shoulder' without 'a hierarchy', to support them to 'be able to do stuff they want to do'.

Throughout fieldwork, it seemed that coordinators, team members and customers engaged in various modes of 'face-work' (Goffman, 1967, p. 16). Lauren's writing underneath Mark's note, for example, might be interpreted as a 'protective manoeuvre', and the avoidance of interventions (e.g. when Kat initially entered the wrong sum into the phone) can be viewed as an act of 'discretion' (Goffman, 1967, p. 16) and 'tact' to avoid the possibility of causing embarrassment (Goffman, 1959).[6] My contention here is that, through acts of making, completing and serving orders, team members are afforded their 'deferential due' (Goffman, 1956, p. 492). The 'common courtesies and rules of public order' – for example, coordinators and team members giving praise and encouragement, ensuring team members fulfilled tasks themselves, and affording them the time and space to do so – ensure team members are accorded deference (Goffman, 1956, p. 476) and are 'imbued with legitimacy' (Hallett, 2003, p. 133). Equally, by abiding by local rules, coordinators, team members and customers display a *good* demeanour; they show that they can be, in turn, relied on as *proper* interactants who 'affirm the sacred quality' of others (Goffman, 1956, p. 497). In addition, such treatment acknowledges the multiple layers of identity of learning-disabled adults. Deference is not simply about showing respect to *someone*, but to secure the status of learning-disabled person as, in this case, an adult worker – that is, as Maria suggests, as a rounded 'person' rather than defining them *only* with reference to 'their disability'.[7]

There is an interactional labour at play, here, for accomplishing a sense of belonging alongside others. Deference and demeanour rituals, in some ways, are dictated by the team members' 'visibility'. Many team members had physical (i.e. visible) impairments. Moreover, they were all young adults wearing a uniform with a slogan explicitly noting the name and aims of the café, namely, around inclusion, belonging and diversity. Uniforms, as 'props' (Goffman, 1959), can indicate how patrons *should* behave, such as knowing that, as Eric (team member) claimed, 'I might be a little bit slow with the coffees and that'. This likely had a material effect on the character of interactions.

Deference and demeanour rituals may also be seen as being shaped by the café's location in a church-based community centre. However, I resist this deduction for two reasons. First, I did not have knowledge of the religious stance of people in this space, nor was this ever cited by team members or coordinators in their discussions with me. Saying that interactions were informed by a Christian ethic would subsequently be speculative and imprecise (customers' presence also seemed to be more guided by interpersonal relationships and location [i.e. living nearby] as opposed to a perceived affiliation with church). Second, reading deference rituals through such a lens risks framing learning-disabled adults as objects of pity and charity (i.e. as part of a 'charity model' of disability). My own reading of the café is that such treatment was guided less by an ethic of charity but, rather, by an attempt to recover the personhood and value of learning-disabled adults.

Finally, deference and demeanour rituals were likely informed by a sense of familiarity. Many customers were 'regulars' and have a steady acquaintance with team members and coordinators. They knew, interactionally speaking, the lay of the land. However, familiar characters do not always follow the script. I attend to this lack of 'ritual care' (Goffman, 1967, p. 95) in the next section.

Interactional transgressions

Interactions between team members, coordinators and customers mostly unfolded in a smooth manner, sustaining not just the internal action, but also celebrating external values (here being the capability, value and personhood of learning-disabled adults). However, interactional expectations were occasionally agitated. There were moments where customers did *not* accord appropriate deference or act with appropriate demeanour which, in turn, aligned with a deficit scripting of disability. This seemed to be based upon infantilising and problematic assumptions of learning-disabled adults. Consider the following extract focused on an interaction between Kat (team member) and a regular customer:

> Kat writes the four items ordered by the customer on a piece of paper and then attempts to enter each item's price into the phone to calculate the overall cost. On each occasion, the customer leans over, hovering their hand over the phone, and indicates to Kat where to press. On the third and fourth occasion of this happening, Kat furrows her eyebrows and pulls a face which appears to indicate her frustration [I know that Kat has previously taken orders without such interventions]. Kat asks, 'cash or card'. 'Card', the customer replies. The customer, again, reaches over and indicates to Kat what button to press. Kat, quietly and without the customer

noticing, huffs. The customer, who has been smiling and (to me at least) affable throughout the exchange, leaves.

As highlighted in the previous section, interventions for supporting team members are sometimes welcome (e.g. helping with money). Yet, these 'protective intercessions' (Goffman, 1979), it seemed, should only be made when invited by team members and there was a serious risk of harm (e.g. sharp knives, heavy equipment and hot water are exclusively handled by coordinators). Kat's reactions in the above vignette made clear that the customer's interventions were unwanted. It constituted what Goffman (1967, pp. 122–123) calls an 'over-involvement', 'a form of tyranny' which can 'momentarily [incapacitate] the individual as an interactant'. Lauren (coordinator) described a similar occasion in which a customer bypassed Mark (team member) by reaching into the money box to get their change; 'I was gobsmacked, I was just so embarrassed for Mark. Would you do that in Costa [Coffee]?' Costa and Starbucks were frequently named as contrasting examples to the café to highlight the extra time that an order might take. Here, they are invoked by Lauren as a comparator when the customer broke the ceremonial order by taking change from the money box. This highlights how the ceremonial order is used as the basis of affording sacred worth to team members. This is a precarious arrangement, since customers do not always uphold certain standards of expectation.

The encounters described above were shaped by customers' assumptions that Mark and Kat could not 'do' money. Expectations of learning-disabled adults shaped the occasion and, ultimately, undermined them. This was also evident when customers directed questions to coordinators (and, occasionally, me) rather than team members:

> Mark [team member] is talking to Maria [coordinator]. A customer approaches and says, 'excuse me?', looking in the direction of Maria. Mark replies, 'can I help you with something?' The customer looks at Mark. They smile, hold his right hand, and pat it gently without saying a word. They turn back to Maria and ask, 'I am going to a class [in the community centre] today and I would like to put in an order. Do I just do that now, or can I decide after the class?' 'It's up to you', Maria replies. The customer responds, 'Okay, thank you' before leaving. Mark stands nearby. He seems confused by the interaction. Mark says to Maria, 'I'm going to check to see if there are more orders.'

This discounting of learning-disabled adults was observed on several occasions during fieldwork. Even in encounters where team members were acknowledged and spoken to, this did not always mean that they were accorded their deferential due. Consider the following extract, in which a large order is served to a group of regular customers:

> Mark [team member] and I approach the customers with two trays of drinks. Mark calls out each order. Each customer gestures to me when their order is called out. On several occasions, I deliver the cup and am asked for extra items (spoon, sugar) or to clarify an order ('Is it soya milk in this?'). All questions are directed to me rather than Mark, who stands nearby. I observe some customers smiling at him whilst tilting their heads. As the final drink is given to a customer, Mark says 'All done'. Some more drinks are due to the customers. As Mark and I

leave to collect them, I hear some customers say 'bless him' while looking at Mark. The comments are later repeated in reference to Graham [team member] who helps Mark and I to serve the remaining drinks.

Lauren and Naomi (coordinators) previously referred to customers who treated team members in this way as 'the bless them brigade'. The negative treatment of learning-disabled adults – of intervening on their behalf, discounting them and/or referring to them in infantilising terms ('bless them') – is often interpreted by coordinators and team members as a product of inexperience and a lack of knowledge about disability, rather than discriminatory attitudes: 'you're not doing it in a negative way, but it's just that lack of experience and lack of knowing how much can be done and not done by [team members]'. For Maria, this treatment is often time limited. Customers initially treat 'an adult with learning disabilities like a child', but 'if they keep coming back and as time goes on, that doesn't happen so much'. Saying 'bless them', for example, 'happens a lot, particularly with the older generation . . . but the more people see what they're doing and they're actually serving and doing things, like doing money, the less it happens'. Here, the response of café members is 'to search for a rational explanation and give the rule breaker the benefit of the doubt' (Scott, 2009, p. 140). Lauren (coordinator) similarly suggests 'not everybody gets it straight away', though she also relates such treatment to 'different personalities', 'generational' differences and 'unconscious bias':

> On the whole people understand, and very quickly, what we are about as an organisation. Most people get it, but not everybody gets it straight away . . . I don't think people are thinking, 'I don't want to meet people with a disability'. I think it's a generational thing as well. It's just a nervousness sometimes of how to speak to somebody who has got a disability. It's not that people are meaning to be prejudiced. Just a bit of unconscious bias, I suppose.

Disability studies scholars may well see such instances as indicative of a longstanding legacy of ableism/disablism. Regardless of intent, learning-disabled adults in the café were not always accorded deference by customers, despite this constituting a space designed to be safe and inclusive for them. Indiscretions, intentional or unintentional, were not always simply a case of new visitors to the café lacking knowledge that insiders rely on (Scott, 2009). Indeed, transgressors were often regular customers.

As Goffman reminds us, people might yearn for deference, but it must be received by others; personhood can be 'developed, accorded, and denied in the interaction order' (Abrams, 2014). The café was organised on the premise that a person in the space had 'a moral right to expect that others will value and treat [them] in an appropriate way' (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). If rules are broken, this is likely to communicate something significant; the treatment of others expresses a conception of that person. In this case, learning-disabled adults are not allotted 'a kind of sacredness that is displayed and confirmed by symbolic acts' (Goffman, 1967, p. 473). Team members are stigmatised – if understanding stigma as an interactional accomplishment (Goffman, 1963) – by customers who disturb the expectation that participants in the café scene should 'hold hands in a chain of ceremony' (Goffman, 1956, p. 493). Their negative treatment arguably points to 'the wider society outside the interaction, to the place the

individual has achieved in the hierarchy of society' (Goffman, 1967, p. 81). In this case, it reflects how learning-disabled adults have been, and continue to be, bound by (deficit-focused) understandings of their lives, where they are configured as subjects of pity, suffering and charity.

Managing transgressors

Goffman (1959) says that when interactional rules are breached, this usually demands management. For example, impatient customers, a common irritation for coordinators and team members, were managed by frontstage apologies and backstage complaints. Eric's (team member) tactic was to 'not get involved' with 'rude' customers and to save face by asserting his popular status in the café ('everyone really likes me'). Moreover, coordinators, like Naomi, handled impatient customers by assuming blame for delays and mishaps. However, in relation to interactional transgressions detailed above (including ignoring and infantilising team members), coordinators had varied responses to this. According to Naomi (coordinator), when asked about customers interfering with team members, coordinators 'try to sort of stop it happen':

> I think people have learned the boundaries without anyone consciously [saying it]. But [when a transgression happened], I might have said, 'we're okay, we can sort it', something like that. Or make sure we were there [with team member] if they came in again . . . [Confronting customers] might be upsetting for [customer and team member]. It might be a little bit embarrassing because I don't always think those things are meant maliciously. They're just trying to help. It's all part of the learning and trying to break down the barriers.

For Lauren (coordinator), whilst similarly saying that such conduct is part of a learning process and not purposefully vicious, she says it must be 'addressed and challenged':

> I think [ignoring team members] happens quite a lot. I think sometimes the customers think we're being rude to them because, if they say to me, 'Could I have a cappuccino?', I'd say, 'Mark's [team member] taking the order. Mark, would it be okay if this lady has a cappuccino?' Initially, they look at me as if to say, 'I've just said it to you, so why are you now passing through somebody else?' But then they do understand and sometimes people will be rude, but they normally come back [to the café]. I think, actually, annoying the customers with these things is an essential part of what we do . . . I often think that the more awkward things that happen in the café are just as beneficial because that's your moment for changing someone's perception.

For Lauren, it is important not to 'ignore' such treatment from customers, and it is her role as coordinator to 'annoy' them by redirecting them to team members. Whilst I did observe this happening, I also witnessed moments where this (mis)treatment of team members went unchallenged. In several of the extracts discussed above, there was often no visible reaction from team members/coordinators. This is not to imply that learning-disabled adults are passive, powerless or unaffected. To imply this is to align with a deficit understanding of disability. Learning-disabled adults, indeed, are active interactants in the scene. A lack of visible reaction can be explained in several ways, such as: acting with 'professionalism'

(with emotional labour [Hochschild, 1983] being part of their 'customer service'); performing their own 'good' demeanour; a lack of confidence or experience in confronting transgressors; turning the other cheek as part of a Christian doctrine (since the café was part of a church/community centre); and/or an indifference to, or not noticing, transgressions.

These explanations are speculative.[8] The last, though, seems less plausible since team members occasionally discussed a customer's conduct in the café's backstage. Moreover, there were moments when members *did* appear to deal with transgressors in subtle ways, such as Kat huffing when a customer gestured which buttons to press on the phone to record an order. Consider the following extract, where Mason (team member) reacts to the intervention of a customer:

> A customer asks Hazel [coordinator] for an update on the order. Lauren [coordinator], hearing this, says, 'It's right here, I'm just going to put it down here and Mason will bring it over to you.' The customer nods and says 'great, well, I'll just come over to get it', appearing to ignore Lauren's request. The customer approaches the end of the counter – a space populated by Mason, Nathan (team member), and Pauline (coordinator) – where drinks are placed for team members to serve. Lauren places a teapot, spoon, and milk pot on the counter. 'Let me grab that', the customer says. They nestle themselves between Mason, Nathan, and Pauline. As they pick up the teapot, Mason picks up the jug and spoon. The customer turns to Mason, saying 'I can take them too'. Mason grimaces, shakes his head, and clutches the items closer to his chest without saying a word. The customer responds 'okay' and walks toward their table along with Mason.

This intervention by the customer is rejected by Mason. He indicates his disapproval by screwing up his face, shaking his head, and retaining the jug and spoon in his grasp. It appeared that team members' lack of visible retort was sometimes dictated by an 'industry of deference' (Brossard, 2019), where people are expected to stage goodwill. As Goffman (1956, p. 493) recognises, a person's failure to show proper deference to others does not necessarily free that person 'from the obligation to act with good demeanour in [their] presence'. Nonetheless, there were slippages. Huffing or showing disapproval in other ways, like Mason above, seemed to repair the violation of interactional arrangements and to restore the situation to its original status.

Such transgressions amounted to 'infractions of informal norms, which are often subtle and unspoken to the point of being indiscernible' (Scott, 2009, p. 140). When occurring, there was a 'mild moral indignation' amongst some coordinators and team members (Scott, 2009, p. 140) who subsequently '[mobilised] themselves to restore the ceremonial order' (Goffman, 1967, p. 114). This served two purposes. First, as Lauren alludes to above, it avoided embarrassment – as a 'regrettable deviation from the normal state' (Goffman, 1967, p. 97) – for all in the scene. According to Goffman (1967, p. 106), the 'discreditor' is 'just as guilty as the person [they discredit] – sometimes more so, for, if [they have] been posing as a tactful [person], in destroying another's image [they] destroy [their] own'. However, in the café, it seemed transgressors were frequently unaware that an offence had occurred. This may be due, in part, to the actions of team members and coordinators (as a tactic of concealment). Regardless of the intent behind their lack of formal confrontation, team members and coordinators defended the order and kept 'the show running smoothly' to avoid 'further disruptions' (Scott, 2009, p. 140).

Second, restoring the ceremonial order suggests the team members and coordinators invest in that order as something that is of strategic and moral-political value. Goffman (1956, p. 475) suggests 'when a rule of conduct is broken, we find that two individuals run the risk of becoming discredited'. And yet in the café, customers were rarely, if ever, called on to account for their 'improper move[s]' (Goffman, 1961, p. 81). They were never, at least in the frontstage of the café, cast as 'a dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds' subject to penalties (Goffman, 1961, p. 81). Instead, it was learning-disabled adults and coordinators who were at risk of being left bruised by customers' conduct, informed by legacies of infantilising and pitying treatment of learning-disabled adults. Responding to this misconduct – by huffing softly (Kat), redirecting customer queries to team members (Lauren), retaining control of items (Nathan), 'not [getting] involved' (Eric), and/or assuming responsibility and blame for customer complaints (Naomi) – allows participants to 'proceed as if no incident has occurred' (Goffman, 1967, p. 110). Moreover, it protects the sacredness and personhood of the team members. They are recognised, in turn, as valuable contributors to the ceremonial order.

Discussion

I have used Goffman's concepts of deference and demeanour to understand the social world of a café run by learning-disabled adults and non-disabled adults. In so doing, I show how interactions in this space are carefully accomplished in ways that accord deference, or not, to learning-disabled adults. In sketching out how interactions play out in the café, I highlight how informal rules play a social function, with deference and demeanour being two components of this ceremonial moral order. Acts of deference and demeanour generate currency to affirm the social status of learning-disabled adults, though this can be threatened by customers.

I conclude with two related reflections. First, deference and demeanour rituals are not fixed or obvious. As Lauren (coordinator) alludes to earlier in the article, customers act in ways that *they* may see as being kind, supportive and appropriate, but are seen by team members and/or coordinators as patronising and offensive. Equally, the conduct of coordinators may be hearable in the same way. For example, through another frame, Lauren (coordinator) writing underneath Mark's note could be seen as infantilising. Perceptions of what counts as 'good' deference will, inevitably, be shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts; different people will themselves orient to different rules and expectations at different moments (and there will be situations where people are unaware of how to act in a particular space). Even so, in this project, my understanding of what might be perceived as 'good' or 'bad' deference and demeanour was shaped by interlocutors – i.e. what acts team members and coordinators saw as problematic (e.g. uninvited interventions), which seemed to be largely agreed upon in this space. Moreover, what I claim constitutes optimum modes of deference and demeanour is an analytical category. Put simply, I read scenes through the eyes of an analyst who is familiar with the recurrent marginalisation and mistreatment of learning- disabled people. This likely shaped how I interpreted encounters which another analyst may read differently; divergent possible interpretations of such scenes are a consequence of the difficulty of converting the texture of fieldwork encounters into logical, unambiguous 'evidence'.

My second reflection is on the role of 'structure'. The café itself is shaped by structural and historical conditions. There is a longstanding and continuing legacy of learning-disabled adults being excluded and marginalised in their interactions with institutional actors (healthcare; education; welfare; housing; employment; care) and non-disabled others (e.g. 'mate'/hate crime; harassment; online trolling). This ostensibly drives the desire for spaces like the café, which is designed to offer opportunities for meaningful activities and personal relationships, as well as honouring and asserting the value and personhood of learning-disabled adults. Thus, structural and historical conditions can be perceived as fostering specific forms of deference. Moreover, we can perceive the mistreatment of team members as being informed by a legacy of learning-disabled adults being subject to ableist/disablist understandings of their lives. The longstanding and enduring marginalisation of learning-disabled adults, in turn, shapes interactional encounters, such as instances of infantilisation and being disregarded.

But how can this be 'evidenced'? In another article (Thomas, 2021), I acknowledge how a more politicised conception of 'stigma', for example, provides a tool for tracing the plights of disabled people and their allies in a period of neoliberal-ableism (Goodley, 2014) – that is, where *disability troubles* are located not in *bodies*, but in *structures*. Attending to matters of structure, cultural narratives, institutional processes and the oppression of (and inequalities faced by) disabled people – conventionally the wheelhouse of disability studies scholars – allows us to analyse how conventions of interaction are animated and secured by dis/ableist ideologies and structures. At the same time, I claim that thinking about 'structure' alone within this context is an austere approach. We should, in turn, avoid 'throwing the "interactionist baby" out with the bath water' (Vassenden et al., 2025, p. 220).

In this article, though not attending to stigma, I make a similar argument. I suggest that Goffman's intellectual task – to 'make large that of which we normally make little' (Strong, 1983, p. 347) – aids our attempts to understand the lives of disabled people. Deference and demeanour are effective weapons in Goffman's theoretical armoury, but are only examples of what is available (at times here, I use Goffman's insights from elsewhere to add theoretical flesh to the empirical bones). Bringing together his ideas – in conjunction with the structural/political sentiments of disability studies – can elevate our understanding of how interactions *get done* between disabled people and non-disabled people, and the impact of the moral component of this order on people's identity work. Like Goffman, whilst I am not opposed to considering the role of structural forces in social life (Goffman, simply, was not interested in integrating this into his analysis), I show how people, in the everyday business of social life, tacitly subvert – and, on occasion, reproduce – deficit scripts of learning disability. There is a prize to gain if disability studies, so often disparaging of Goffman's (1967, p. 3) insights, engages with his 'sociology of occasions' – that is, an interest in 'moments and their [people]' rather than '[people] and their moments'.

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Notes

1. There is a risk of presenting disability studies as a singular and cohesive discipline. It is, rather, a broad, multidisciplinary church, with different theoretical allegiances and methodological and empirical approaches. Nonetheless, contributors in it are largely united by a social oppression paradigm (C. Thomas, 2012) and by promoting more liberatory, positive and valued scripts of disability (Goodley, 2014).
2. This corresponds to arguments outside of disability studies that attempt to recover an interactionist/Goffmanian understanding of stigma (Müller, 2020; Smith et al., 2022; Vassenden et al., 2025) and identify Goffman, contrary to popular opinion, as a theorist of power (Jenkins, 2008; see also: Thomas et al., in press).
3. One exception is Abrams (2014). Drawing on Goffman's books *The Insanity of Place* (1971) and *Mental Symptoms and Public Order* (1967), Abrams (2014) suggests that neither 'personality' nor 'disability' are pre-given, static states of being. To comprehend the experiences of disabled people and people with mental health issues, then, we should use Goffman's work to study 'the order of situationally interpersonal interaction' (Abrams 2014).
4. In the *Routledge International Handbook of Goffman Studies* (Jacobsen & Smith, 2022), for instance, there are only passing references to deference and demeanour, excepting one paragraph in Smith's (p. 42) entry on 'Ritual'.
5. These expectations, as a kind of interactional leeway, connect to the concept of 'crip time', that is, how social clocks are bent to meet disabled bodies and minds (Kafer, 2013). This destabilisation of societal and cultural clocks, as an expectation in the café, acts to show deference to learning-disabled adults.
6. Drawing on Scott's (2018) 'sociology of nothing', avoidance rituals can be perceived as an 'act of commission', where a person 'makes a deliberate choice to eschew a potential line of action (Goffman, 1967)'. However, in the café, this does not, as Scott suggests, render people as socially conspicuous.
7. This points to the need to attend to intersectionality when attempting to comprehend the lives of disabled people. Gender, race, class and age are important markers in this respect, though they were not always prominent in my reading of fieldwork data. Thank you to the reviewer for making this point.
8. It is also worth noting that Goffman has been critiqued for not sufficiently accounting for resistance or modes of management other than 'passing' (Tyler, 2018; Wan, 2003). He is mostly concerned with stability and how this is sustained. I show how the interaction order, here, is disturbed in ways that degrade learning-disabled adults. This suggests a possible expansion of Goffman's insights.

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