The Continuing Value of Erving Goffman: You Follow? By Gareth Thomas

"You have to keep this con even after you take his money. He can't know you took him" *Henry Gondorff, The Sting*.

The Sting is a 1973 American caper film starring Robert Redford (as Johnny Hooker), Paul Newman (as Henry Gondorff), and Robert Shaw (as Doyle Lonnegan). The film revolves around Hooker and Gondorff, two professional grifters, who attempt to con Lonnegan, a mob boss, out of a large sum of money. To avoid providing spoiler alerts and potentially receiving abuse from some pesky internet trolls, I shall build upon the plot no further (though you can find the official film trailer here).

At first glance, beginning a Cardiff Ethnography post with a curt description of George Roy Hill's award-winning classic may seem peculiar, particularly since the title cites the name Erving Goffman. However, if you've seen The Sting and you're familiar with the work of a man Robert Erwin once described as "eerie" and like "the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz", you'll perhaps draw parallels between the film and the latter's neglected 1952 paper Cooling the Mark Out (for other films displaying Goffman-esque affinities, think of his book Asylums and Jack Nicholson in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest). In CTMO, Goffman unpacks the nuances of a confidence operation, a way of obtaining money under false pretences by exercising deceit and fraud – much like our friends Hooker and Gondorff. The analogy becomes a framework to explore how a 'mark,' the victim or potential victim of planned exploitation (the role of Lonnegan in The Sting), comes to accept their loss and resolve taken-for-granted expectations, i.e., how they are 'cooled out'. Goffman acknowledges whilst those participating in a confidence game are found in only a few social settings, the concept of cooling the mark out becomes an analogy for how individuals contend with adaptations to loss and failure in everyday life.

This post is essentially a story of my introduction to this paper and how this intersects with my simultaneously galling and enthralling experience of writing my first journal article for publication. A few years ago, my Masters Degree supervisor recommended engaging with Goffman's paper after I had fretfully shared some very tentative research findings. The study was based not on con-men or victims of confidence operations but, rather, mothers of children with Down's syndrome. At first, I was slightly sceptical about the reference; I always enjoyed reading Goffman's work (mainly because I could understand him a hell of a lot more than some other indecipherable scholars) yet I was unsure as to how a paper on con-artists could benefit my own analysis. My main gatekeeper, a mother of two in her mid-forties, didn't exactly strike me as a real-life Top Cat devising quick-money schemes with her gang in Hoagy's Alley.

After canning my cynicism and taking heed of my supervisor's advice, I engaged with – and thoroughly enjoyed – this often-overlooked yet deeply striking paper. I realised it was not so much about con-games but rather how individuals deal with loss/failure in many settings and thus rectify this situation. In my own research, Goffman's contentions became the major framework for exploring how mothers contend with a loss of self, a loss of maternal expectations, and a loss of the 'perfect child' following a diagnosis of Down's syndrome (this is not the place to discuss my findings any further).

After gaining my Masters degree and joyfully recommending Goffman's paper to anyone who even uttered the word 'loss' in an academic context, I decided to try and publish a condensed version of my dissertation. After consulting with a few colleagues, I was advised to gear the article towards one of two audiences: disability studies/medical sociologists or, in the words of one reviewer, "Goffman freaks". With slight hesitancy, I pursued the former thinking I would have a wider range of journals to select for my submission. Sadly, as it turned out, the article was rejected three times over a period of two years. Many criticisms were aimed at the paper: the study was not large enough, there was a lack of clarity about how the paper should be read, the data analysis strategy was unclear, only a few details about my study's limitations (indeed there were many…) were provided, and, perhaps most painfully, my offering was not original or valuable enough to fully contribute to the existing literature.

Given this was my first attempt of a major publication, I became disillusioned and ready to give up on the article (along with being ready, after casting my eyes over the third rejection delivered via email, to throw my laptop out of the second-floor window). I felt disheartened and piqued my work was (of course, on reflection, rightly and fairly) subjected to such carping and critical comments. Perhaps I needed cooling out? Nevertheless, deep down, I guess I did suspect my article was not strong enough for a medical sociology or disability studies audience. I was encouraged by some colleagues to pursue the Goffman angle and with a bit more reading and a few caffeine-heavy drinks occupying the fridge shelves, I developed and redeveloped it a large number of times, with some extremely helpful advice from a small number of scholars along the way, before the initial submission. There could be worse tasks than re-reading the work of Goffman, right? Anyway, the first submission was accepted with minor revisions. A few screams of "hazzah" and "back of the net" (for all of you Alan Partridge fans out there) later and I forgot about all of the negativity I experienced on receipt of the preceding reviews(1).

I guess the reason I told this story is to flesh out what I learnt from my experience of reading Goffman's paper and from trying to transform my work into an article. First, I learnt to develop a thick skin when receiving invited comments about my work. Sure, it can hurt when one challenges and criticises, or at worst completely denounces, your

ideas. However, rather than being peeved and downtrodden, I have understood taking on board different suggestions make for a more rounded, and of course much stronger, argument. Second, I learnt enquiring for help from colleagues is always a valuable exercise and should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of my own perceived limitations. Whilst I may not always agree with the suggestions (at times, I can certainly subscribe to the mantra a camel is a horse designed by committee), the comments of others have proved invaluable in helping me improve and gain confidence in my work. Third, the experience has taught me to be patient. Too often I rushed work without giving it the care and deliberation it necessitated. The article has taken the best part of three years to get right and, in hindsight, is much stronger for it.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, I have recognised the value of giving full attention to Goffman's main contentions. Too often, his work is subjected to what might be called an add Goffman and stir approach, with his wider corpus (particularly *Stigma* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) often referenced fleetingly without a critical and sustained engagement. Recently, Cardiff University organised the 'Goffman and the Interaction Order: Thirty Years On' symposium. It was a huge success and recognised the continued relevance of Goffman's conceptual scaffolding for sociology and beyond. The whole experience outlined above, in turn, made me recognise that a brief and flimsy citation to Goffman does not do justice to his important yet still often overlooked offerings. Indeed, one needs to give him the attention he so rightly deserves.

To return to the catchphrase of our mark Doyle Lonnegan, "you follow?"

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1. The article will be published in Symbolic Interaction (volume and issue number TBC).