

# Toward a Historical Sociology of Social Situations<sup>1</sup>

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In recent years there has been a growing call to historicize sociology by paying more attention to the contextual importance of time and place as well as to issues of process and contingency. Meeting this goal requires bringing historical sociology and interactionism into greater conversation via a historical theory of social situations. Toward this end, the authors of this article draw on Erving Goffman's work in *Frame Analysis* to conceptualize experience in social situations as grounded in multilayered cognitive frames and to demonstrate how such a framework helps illuminate historical changes in situated interaction.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years prominent voices have not only called for historical sociology to take on a greater role within sociology proper but have also advocated for the more ambitious aim of historicizing the entire field (Abrams 1982; Calhoun 1996; Sewell 2005). These statements have argued for the importance of sociology's paying greater attention not only to obviously historical categories like time and space but also to issues of contingency and creativity, process and emergence, and cognition and emotion (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005; Steinmetz 2007). If fulfilled, this vision of sociology would put interaction at the front and center of historical explanation. The argument for historicized sociology can be read alternatively, then, as a call for a more fully rounded sociology that brings history and interaction into deeper conversation (Tilly 2007).

The current underdeveloped state of dialogue between interaction and

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank the participants in Stanford University's Social Psychology Workshop as well as the *AJS* reviewers for their helpful suggestions and comments. This work was funded in part by a National Science Foundation award (NSF 0624134). Direct correspondence to David Diehl, School of Education, 485 Laussen Mall, Stanford University, Stanford, California 94305. E-mail: diehld@stanford.edu

history can itself be seen as the result of the internal dynamics of sociology's own recent history. The late 1960s saw a two-fronted attack on the disciplinary domination enjoyed by structural-functionalism in the postwar period. On the first front, conflict theory argued that social change could only be understood through the study of material forces (Alexander and Colomy 1990). Contemporary historical sociology emerged from this Marxian line of critique and, following its logic, paid little attention to the cultural dynamics of change (Abbott 1991). From another direction microsociology launched its own attack. Theoretical aspects of symbolic interactionism had always been at odds with functionalism but for the most part the two had peacefully coexisted by carving out different areas of study. This truce dissolved, however, with the emergence of ethnomethodology's more radical critique of functionalism and its uncompromising emphasis on the situated nature of behavior (Ritzer 1985).

While both the conflict and microsociological critiques of functionalism emerged in the same period, they developed largely in isolation from one another with different, and often presumed incompatible, theoretical and empirical pursuits. In recent years, however, macrosociology, including its historical branch, has increasingly turned its attention to issues of culture, cognition, and the interactional nature of shared meaning (Friedland and Mohr 2004). In contrast to this weaving of interactional concepts into historical theory, however, work that historicizes the sociology of microinteraction has been slower to emerge.<sup>2</sup>

Another reason for this lack of dialogue is the theoretical aversion to historical explanation that runs through microsociology. Phenomenology and large parts of symbolic interactionism see history as nongeneralizable, either because of the particularistic nature of individual consciousness or the localized construction of meaning. Rational-choice and structural theories utilize transhistorical models of actors that avoid explanations involving the contingencies of particular times or places. In contrast to both these approaches is work that shifts the analytic focus to the nature of the social situation itself and attempts to analytically disaggregate it into its constitutive parts. This strategy makes historical comparisons more

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most important historical work that does speak specifically to issues of interaction is that of Norbert Elias (1978, 1982, 1983) and his students (e.g., Wouters 1986; Mennell 2007). Best exemplified in his masterful work chronicling the evolution of manners and behavioral standards among European elites (1978), Elias's interest was in historical transformations of individual psychology. This means that while his concerns were similar to ours, he was nonetheless interested in interactional changes only insofar as they provided leverage for understanding transformations in individual habitus or nation-state formations. Our concerns here are more Goffmanesque, however, and have to do with historical changes in the social situation itself. In contrast to Elias, we are interested not only in codified cultural rules for interaction but also in the nature of shared experience itself.

tractable because it allows for theorizing about how general mechanisms and frameworks of situations combine and interact differently across various contexts, resulting in culturally and historically differentiated outcomes (Tilly 2006, p. 423). This ability to compare the nature of interaction across contexts in a way not reducible to individual psychology or trans-situational structures is, we argue, the key for a historical sociology of situations.

There is also reason to think that the need for generating this kind of comparative framework for social situations is growing. Much contemporary social theory posits a historical trajectory in which modern actors are becoming increasingly decoupled from macrostructures, traditions, and collective cultures (Tomlinson 1999). The result is a social world in which situated interaction is far more contingent and locally negotiated than in the past (Beck 1992). From a disciplinary perspective a sociology that cannot describe these historical changes in interactional terms is incomplete. As the place where individuals confront social structures (McHugh 1968; House 1981; Archer 1995), the situation does heavy theoretical lifting in macrohistorical perspectives but is treated like a black box with its internal workings left largely unexplored. More specifically, and as we will explore later, theories of epochal transformations tend to discuss social change in large, and largely disembodied, ways while saying little about how interaction directly affects and is affected by these larger historical forces. Reframing this as an issue of situations also has the benefit of making theories of post- and late modernity more palatable for sociology because, rather than viewing epochs as totalizing systems, we can see them as interactional orders that may exist side by side in the same broader culture.

To the end of sketching the initial outlines of a historical theory of situations we have four aims in this article: (1) to disaggregate the largely holistic collective experience of social situations into its analytically distinct layers and describe how their interrelation and content can change across contexts, (2) to demonstrate how our conceptual framework can help incorporate situated interaction into epochal theories of historical change, (3) to discuss what this implies about potential trajectories for the future of social situations, and finally (4) to briefly sketch possible lines of research inspired by this work. We see Erving Goffman's work in *Frame Analysis* (1974; henceforth *FA*) as the best lead toward the kind of conceptualization of the social situation we are after.<sup>3</sup> Before explaining

<sup>3</sup> *Frame Analysis* may seem a strange choice to ground a historical theory of situations given that one of the main critiques leveled against it was its ahistorical nature (Gouldner 1970). In the years following the publication of *FA*, however, several reviewers pointed out the inherent potential it contained for historicizing structural understanding

our elaboration of *FA*, however, we need to first situate it both within Goffman's larger body of work and within microsociological and social cognitive theories about situations and situated behavior more generally.

#### THEORIZING SOCIAL SITUATIONS

Goffman's primary interest in *FA* was describing not only how individuals come to understand and experience "what is going on here and now" in a situation but also how it is that we seem to so easily arrive at consensus about the nature of this social reality (Goffman 1974, p. 9). His primary explanatory tool for this phenomenon was the frame construct, which he defined as "principles of organization which govern the subjective meanings we assign to social events" (1974, p. 11). In other words, frames are our tacit theories about "what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin 1980, p. 6). How we relate to any given activity is a direct result of how we frame it.

This allows us to give order and meaning to a potentially overwhelming world of sensory experience by enabling us "to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined" in terms of a given frame (Goffman 1974, p. 21). If, for example, we attend a wedding, then there are numerous ways we could describe it depending on the particular frame we employ. We could view it as an institutionalized ritual, as part of the personal biographies of the bride and groom, in terms of the spatial layout of props and artifacts, and so on. Each of these differently framed perspectives would lead us to focus on some aspects of the situation and to disregard others. Central to Goffman's theory, however, is that we typically do not have to choose a single frame. Rather, when navigating the real world we find ourselves in encounters in which numerous interpretive frames are interwoven and embedded within one another and multiple aspects of identity and role are simultaneously triggered. And yet, despite the complexity, we usually experience reality as a seamless whole.

This is the image found throughout *FA*, one in which situations are structurally composed of categories of frames hierarchically layered and laminated on one another (Goffman 1974, chaps. 3, 6, 8). The multilayered nature of situations was Goffman's way of explaining how people seem to be highly skilled at sustaining multiple complex orientations in interaction without becoming confused or losing a sense of normality (Misztal 2001). Returning to the example above, our experience of a wedding is usually holistic even if we have the ability to analytically distinguish

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of situated reality and for discussing the dominant epistemological and ontological assumptions across diverse cultures and historical epochs (Frank 1979, p. 187).

different interpretive frames. An important implication of this is that the relationship between frame and situation is not one to one (Goffman 1974, p. 561). By characterizing social situations as gestalt complexes of multilayered frames we can systematically relate different social situations and begin to develop the means of historically comparing them. According to Goffman, we experience different kinds of situations as having their own particular “feeling” or “ethos” (Goffman 1963, p. 19). We need an analytical framework in order to make this recognizable but fuzzy sense of situational character into something systematically comparable.

Importantly, part of what distinguishes Goffman’s work from other sociological theories of cognition is that for him frames are more than just mental structures triggered by a social stimulus. Instead, as Goffman understood them, frames are intersubjective constructs and must be maintained in an ongoing manner through actors’ constant monitoring and adjusting their behavior to the situation and to each other (Baptista 2003, p. 197). Frames, then, do not so much limit experience and perception as provide a powerful means for coordinated interaction by supplying a structure that allows actors to become aware of, and attend to, the same situational variables. So while frames organize experience, they do so within largely pre-given cultural constraints, but at the same time they must be jointly achieved in ongoing interaction (Manning 1992).<sup>4</sup>

#### Situating Goffman’s Situation

While the social context of coordinated behavior and mutual attention was central for Goffman throughout his career (Scheff 2005), *FA* marked a decided shift in approach compared to his earlier work. Understanding the nature of this shift is important not only because it helps illuminate our framework but also because it reflects two broad approaches to the study of situations that are worth distinguishing. In his early work Goffman was primarily concerned with how actors regulate and adjust their behavior within social situations not of their own making. This included the study of the presentation of self (Goffman 1959), ritual displays of

<sup>4</sup> While *FA* is Goffman’s most important work from his late period and one of his most cited, it is also arguably also his most misunderstood. Despite the widespread use of the frame concept in sociology, especially in the social movements literature, as something consciously created and actively selected, in Goffman’s work frames are socially pre-given and culturally defined (see Koenig [2004] for a useful discussion of the wide range of ways the term is used in the social sciences). We think that the purposeful use of frames in discourse is similar to Goffman’s early work on strategic interaction. What is potentially lost, however, is the important contribution of *FA* for understanding how, e.g., social movement actors create the shared experience that makes frame contests meaningful and understandable in the first place.

deference and demeanor (Goffman 1955), and strategic interaction (Goffman 1967). In his later work, especially *FA* and *Forms of Talk* (1981), Goffman stepped back from his early focus to ask more explicitly how the shared ground necessary for the coordination of everyday experience was structured to begin with. And so in *FA* Goffman's concern was not with interaction itself but, instead, with the experience of interaction and the shared cognitive structures that make it intersubjectively meaningful and understandable (1974, p. 127).

This new focus on situational experience marked the first time Goffman took the concerns of ethnomethodology head-on, although his work was more pragmatic and interactional than phenomenological (1974, p. 410; Smith 2006). This turn was made possible by the explosion of cognitive research in the 1960s that allowed him to build a bridge between his rather structural view of interaction and the growing sociological interest in consciousness. Notably, his use of the frame construct as a means of describing the intersubjective nature of cognition presaged many of the major shifts in the field since *FA* was first published (Strydom 2007). Early cognitive theory questioned many of sociology's classic models of thought, especially those that relied on notions like group mind (Bergesen 2004). Today, however, cognitive research is increasingly incorporating notions of embodiment, situatedness, historicity, and activity (Goodwin 2000), making it clear that social theory is necessary if we are to understand how cognition operates not only in the heads of individuals but also intersubjectively in the social world. For this reason alone *FA* is well worth revisiting.

Another advantage of this view of frames as being mutually sustained in ongoing interaction is that it allowed Goffman to rework, although certainly not erase, the traditional sociological dichotomy between structural (and objective) and voluntaristic (and subjective) explanations of situational behavior (Gonos 1977). In *FA* Goffman offers descriptions of interaction that highlight both the largely unconscious cognitive structuring of situated experience and the conscious negotiation of the meaning of that situation through the strategic use of cultural tools (Collins 1988; McLean 1998). The key to this relationship is that negotiations and adjustments in interaction are meaningful and understandable only in relation to the shared background reality supported by frames. This can be thought of as two distinct moments in situational interaction. The first is the largely tacit and unconscious recognition of the type of situation being encountered and the shared orientation it induces among actors by triggering presituational understandings of roles and relationships. The second moment occurs if these underlying frames are contested or if behavioral tuning is required, but again these secondary adjustments are only

meaningful and sensible when they reference the shared reality of the first moment.<sup>5</sup>

The difference, then, is between frames operating as the background structure of shared reality on the one hand and as tools for strategic and creative behavior on the other. We think that this distinction not only helps draw a link between Goffman's early and late work, it also provides a means for productively fitting together seemingly incompatible strands of microsociological theory. If we see structural and volunteeristic variants of microsociology as explaining different "moments" of situated interaction, we can see them as complementary rather than competing views of situations. More specifically, we could see these two moments as having an orthogonal relationship in which the structure of situational context is composed of multilayered cognitive frames and interactional rituals and routines and is conceptualized as the collective movement of actors across these layers.<sup>6</sup> These rituals and routines may be habitual and unreflexive or agentic and creative in instances of problems and ruptures. In either case coordination requires the shared ground generated by situational frames.

#### Elaborating Frame Analysis

The benefit of *FA* for a theory of social situations amenable to comparative analysis is that it allows us to take a situation that is generally experienced holistically and refract it into analytically constitutive layers in much the same way a prism refracts light into its spectral colors. The image we are proposing is not of embedded frames that go from large to small, macro to micro, or concrete to abstract. Rather the situation is seen as a gestalt complex of interconnected and analytically comparable perspectives. The

<sup>5</sup> We see Goffman's view of situational structure as being in line with emerging research that sees situated action as beginning with sweeping implicit and automatic cognition that generates a background orientation against which ongoing behavior is judged and understood (Uleman, Saribay, and Gonzalez 2008). If, however, problems arise during this automatic process, then conscious deliberation occurs but does so in a manner influenced by the biases of the initial unconscious rendering of the situation (Cunningham and Zelazo 2007).

<sup>6</sup> The use of "frame" in social movements theory can offer an example of this relationship (see Snow et al. 1986). While Goffman saw frames as socially pre-given and culturally defined, social movements theory has treated them as consciously created and actively selected for by movements to gain recruits and public sympathy. The social movements use of "frame," then, has glossed over Goffman's interest in the structure of shared experience and moved directly into the question of how these shared perceptions are strategically manipulated. The potential problem with such a jump is that it is only through the shared structure of experience that the discursive frame contests initiated by social movements are potentially resonant and understandable to the public in the first place.

ability to disaggregate a situation into its constitutive frame layers does not belong, however, only to the outside observer. For both Scheff (1990, p. 193) and Collins (1994, p. 283) this capacity to move across frames and shift interpretations and manipulate meaning is an important social skill that characterizes the reflexive actor.<sup>7</sup> But what constitutes these layers?

One of the most persistent critiques of *FA* is that the concept of the frame itself was not adequately systematized (Gamson 1975). We agree that while Goffman offered a rich vocabulary for several different types of frames he only left clues about how he thought they interrelated. And while he saw identifying a culture's complex of frameworks (or as he called it, a cosmology of frames) as the ultimate aim of *FA*, he left this work for future efforts (Goffman 1974, p. 27). Goffman did, however, delineate two general classes of frameworks—natural and social. Through the natural frame events are construed as being unguided and unmediated by social actors. In contrast, social frameworks present events as the result of human will and intelligence. It is worth noting that this ability to distinguish between intentional and unintentional is a developmental milestone of infant cognition (Carpenter et al. 1998).

The social framework as Goffman presented it is too coarse to capture the variety of ways that we perceive other people, but there are several areas we can turn to for elaboration. For psychologists who study social perception, social groups, roles, and personality traits are three of the central lenses through which we interpret the behavior of others (see Morgan and Schwalbe 1990; Bodenhausen and Macrae 2006). Perhaps not coincidentally, social identity theorists and identity theorists have also identified *group*, *role*, and *individual* as three culturally mediated self-identities that actors attempt to validate in social interaction (Smith-Lovin 2003; Burke 2004; Stets 2006). Further, we can see echoes of this threefold distinction in *FA* itself (1974, pp. 269–86) and even in macrohistorical theory (Frank and Meyer 2002). For this reason we use these three categories of perception and interpretation as the basis for expanding and systematizing a social ontology of the situation (McFarland 2004).<sup>8</sup> More specifically, the frame categories we discuss are

<sup>7</sup> Scheff and Collins also represent two of the most important contemporary extensions of Goffman's work on social situations, each aligning with one of the two interactional moments discussed previously. Scheff (1990, 2005) has done important work on how frames related to one another in generating social context, while Collins's (1981, 2005) work on interactional ritual chains has usefully elaborated the role of shared attention and emotion in mobilization situated interaction.

<sup>8</sup> While we see the frame categories we identify as being central to generating a shared sense of social reality and find it difficult to imagine interaction proceeding without at least tacit attention paid to them, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Future research should seek to elaborate on these basic types of frames.

*Natural frame.*—The natural frame guides understanding of events as unmediated by the agency of social actors. From this perspective we see situations as a natural ecology of agentless bodies.

*Social frames.*—Social frames enable us to understand events as guided by the internal motivations and interests of actors.

*Person frame.*—The person frame is the base layer of social interpretation. From this vantage point we attribute behavior and action to conscious and morally responsible actors. Here we see social situations as composed of persons possessing abstract and unknown trans-situational biographies.

*Institutionalized role frame.*—Institutionalized role frames are the culturally legitimate frame for a given strip of activity. That is, in most situations the institutional role frame is the taken-for-granted answer to the question of “what is going on here?” This frame is rooted in the rules and conventions of coordinated activity, and so through this frame we see situations as composed of social roles.

*Character frame.*—Social situations are incomplete and require individuals to negotiate how to proceed in ill-defined spaces, to smooth over interactional rough patches, and to reinforce the underlying order by transforming it in various ways. In the multilayered situation we call this layer the character frame, and in it we see the collective and stylized enactments of particular institutionalized roles.

The connection between frame layers is more than just their ordering, and we think it is important to understand how experience and interpretation interrelate across them. In *FA* Goffman argued that the relationship between frames is defined by what he called “formulas” (1974, pp. 269–84), which we will describe in more detail later. These formulas provided rules for the interrelationships of frame layers and speak to how each is constrained and conditioned by the others. A central part of our analytical framework will be conceptualizing the formulas between each hierarchically embedded layer. We will argue that the change in the cultural definitions of these formulas is a key source of historical variation in situations, including the shifting normative features of encounters.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> This notion of culturally derived formulas linking layers of interaction is not unique to Goffman. A similar idea can be seen, e.g., in Bourdieu’s discussion of “the space of positions” and “position taking” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 105). The “space of positions” refers to the way social structure influences the entry of individuals into different social categories and roles. “Position taking” refers to the way individuals, once in these categories and roles, orient themselves within the range of socially sanctioned and meaningful behavior. These two aspects of frames will be key to our explanation of historical changes in frame interrelations and contents.

## FRAME CATEGORIES

### Natural Frame

An important aspect of conceptualizing experience in social situations as structural embeddings of frames is that it allows interaction (and its study) to be grounded in the reality of the physical world (Collins 1994, p. 281). Compared to some other microsociological theories, frame analysis does not conceptualize the social world as existing precariously over an abyss of existential meaninglessness (Garfinkel 1967). Instead, interaction takes place in a material and physical world and is built up out of the constraints of nature and the contingencies of biological existence. Hunger, pain, and death are all examples of events we interpret as being outside the realm of conscious human behavior. While such states may be the result of intentional acts (e.g., hunger is a result of skipping lunch) the states themselves are not generally understood as being intentional.

This does not mean, however, that interpretation through the natural frame is not socially influenced. At the individual level cognition is embodied and can be influenced by social cuing. Research has shown, for example, that activating stereotypes about the elderly causes people to slow down both their walking and their ability to classify words (Dijksterhuis and Bargh 2001). Closer to our interest in the mutuality of framing, however, is the way social understandings about the nature and functions of bodies are constructed through interaction, a point most closely associated with Foucault (1977, 1978) and feminist extensions (and critiques) of his work (e.g., Butler 1989; Sawicki 1991). While there have always been cultural differences in the interpretation of embodied experience (e.g., the pain of the hero has a different social meaning than that of the villain),<sup>10</sup> many theorists posit that in contemporary times the body is more and more becoming a site of personal reflexivity and choice and that its social meaning is becoming less of a “given” (Giddens 1991; Schilling 1993). And while our interest in this study is with the multilayered nature of social frames, it remains important too that interpretations are always embodied and that the meaning and understanding of that embodiment is never detached from its social context.<sup>11</sup>

### Person Frame

While the natural frame guides the perception of human behavior in terms of unintentional causes, the person frame does the same in terms of an

<sup>10</sup> We thank an *AJS* reviewer for this point.

<sup>11</sup> The natural frame here bears a similarity to Merleau-Ponty's (1964) notion of intercorporeality, which is the idea that our intersubjective understanding bodies emerge out of the embodied nature of interaction itself.

abstract and transsituational notion of personhood. It is, in other words, the way in which we take others and ourselves to be “persons” and not just bodies or physical objects. Personhood, then, is something that is mutually ratified through the stance that actors take toward each other in a given situation, even if that process is largely subconscious. Despite the commonsense notion of personhood as a category of the natural world, there is, however, a great deal of cultural and historical variability in its definition (Mauss 1985).

Central to the mutual ratification of personhood are our theories of minds, the sense, developed early in childhood, that unlike other objects in the world people possess thoughts and feelings (Perner and Wimmer 1985). From this initial understanding we generate theories about how those minds operate and respond to events. Related to this is our generic sense that the persons we encounter have a conscious existence and individual biographies that stretch beyond the confines of a particular situation.<sup>12</sup> We can see an affinity here with Schutz’s notion of the natural attitude, or the sense we carry with us that the people we meet are real, “that the other is like me, capable of acting and thinking” (Schutz 1967, p. 174).<sup>13</sup> Unlike the coarse notion of the natural attitude, however, a conceptualization of the social situation as multilayered frames helps account for the fact that there is great deal of variation, both personal and cultural, in the experience and negotiation of personhood (Perinbanayagam 1974).

For many philosophers the notion of personhood also includes the attribution of moral responsibilities and duties (Rawls 1971; Taylor 1985). As Dennett argues, our metaphysical and moral notions of personhood are inextricably intertwined (Dennett 1976), and both are central to our notion of the person frame.<sup>14</sup> The former refers to the person as possessing

<sup>12</sup> While some work on the construction of the self utilizes the notion of frames, we mean something different here. Rather than looking at how individuals come to identify themselves and then socially project this understanding via frames (McLean 2007), we are interested in how the abstract notion of “person” is understood and collectively ratified and reinforced through situational interaction. This distinction between self-categorization and projection versus the mutual ratification of identities and roles through framed interaction is relevant in all the frame categories we will discuss.

<sup>13</sup> While scholars of various stripes may have particular discipline-based notions of personhood (e.g., *Homo economicus*), most real-world interaction is embedded in folk theories of persons.

<sup>14</sup> Our description here of moral duties echoes Goffman’s (1963) notion of face, but we agree with a distinction made by Mao (1994) between individual face (i.e., respect for the individual) and social face (i.e., respect for persons as representatives of a group). We think the latter notion of social face is similar to the norms of the person frame while Goffman’s more individual notion of face will fit better into our discussion of the character frame later.

intelligence and consciousness, the latter to the person as having rights and responsibilities and being accountable for their actions. This frame, then, is the means through which mutual ratification of personhood occurs based not only on the attribution of consciousness and volition but also in terms of defining the scope and range of moral responsibility and culpability, both of which are central, for instance, in the philosophies of our legal systems. Once we have located the source of behavior in the volition of others and classified them as persons of a certain type, our orientation moves to the shared activity of the situation.

#### Institutionalized Role Frame

Through the institutionalized role frame we see a situation as composed of copresent persons carrying out systematic, and coordinated, activity through the enacting of social roles. And since the institutionalized role frame is the one associated with a given strip of activity in a situation it is our category closest to the conventional microsociological use of “frame.” In answering the commonsense question of “what is going on here?” this frame provides a set of culturally legitimate scripts and schemas for a given activity (Goffman 1974, p. 1). Even still, actors do more than mindlessly enact institutional scripts because performances always occur “with minor modifications, from a (somewhat idealized) ‘template’” (Baptista 2003, p. 205).

The multiple facets of institutionalized behavior (e.g., turn taking, forms of talk, norms of demeanor) are connected to specific role expectations and activity rules (McCall and Simmons 1978; Stryker 1980).<sup>15</sup> The institutionalized role frame provides situationally contextualized means for actors to coordinate their behavior in terms of these rules and expectations. First, this frame locates the perceived source of actor motivation within the roles they are enacting. This means interpreting others as goal-pursuing and pragmatic agents, while the same behavior may be understood through different frames as being motivated by personal preference, unconscious disposition, or even universal human nature. Second, the institutionalized role frame not only filters persons into activity-specific complementary and counter roles (Lindesmith and Strauss 1956), it also defines

<sup>15</sup> The primary activity of a situation comes with what Goffman called “anchors,” or temporal-spatial procedures and cues to ensure that interaction remains understandable and predictable (Goffman 1974, pp. 251–69). This includes brackets that signal the beginnings and ends of activities, cues about which props and physical aspects of the environment are important, as well as expectations and norms for role enactments. Anchors are what separate one institutionalized role frame from another and are the means by which actors feel secure that the activity purported to be happening actually is (e.g., how we know that a date really is a date or that a meeting really is a meeting).

legitimate interaction between them (Merton 1957). To put it another way, through the role frame we not only understand ourselves and others as being motivated by role demands, we also see how those roles fit together in the larger social structures within which they are enacted.

### Character Frame

While the coordination of interaction needs to be grounded in the predictability and understandability of roles, those roles are rarely performed mechanically or played straight. This is the case not only because individuals possess the ability and desire for creative action (Joas 1996) but also because there are too many contingencies in the social world for roles to be enacted without ongoing efforts to validate them, smooth over interpretational problems, and make minor adjustments in the flow of activity. The character frame is the vantage point through which we interpret the “character” of particular role enactments, a lamination upon the straight performance of the institutionalized role frame. Through this perspective we see situations as being composed of expressive and creative “characters,” although ultimately that expressivity and creativity may be routinized reflections of situational demands (Goffman 1974, pp. 574–75).

The nature of the coordination of experience within the character frame is Janus-faced in that it aids with meeting two distinct situational requirements. First, it serves to reinforce the underlying institutionalized role frame upon which it is laminated. This is done when role performances require the injection of character for successful enactment (e.g., flight attendant, auctioneer; Goffman 1974, chap. 14), even if the display of emotion is artificial and consciously manufactured (Hochschild 1985).<sup>16</sup> It also may occur in a less systematic way when character and style are used as tools for solving interactional problems. When a doctor makes a joke to put a patient at ease (Goffman 1955) or a coworker engages in account making to smooth over a misunderstanding (Scott and Lyman 1968), character work is done in the service of reinforcing or repairing a shared orientation toward the institutionalized role frame.

The second “face” of the character frame is that it allows for actors to project out-of-frame roles and identities. Roles vary in the degree of behavioral demands they place on actors as well as in the amount of latitude they provide for the display of behaviors not directly associated with them. This variable degree in role demands allows individuals to engage in character displays that present valued aspects of self and style not associated with the role. Moreover, the desire to show out-of-role aspects of self is

<sup>16</sup> Moreover, successful character displays of this type may help an individual attain higher status by demonstrating skillfulness at their role.

heightened when the role being played is an undesirable one. Importantly, these displays of self are done within the space provided by the institutionalized role frame that coordinates interaction. For example, if an individual wants to display some valued aspect of her identity in a business meeting, she must first ensure that her role performance as a businessperson is interpreted as legitimate. Once socially ratified in her formal role, a limited repertoire of character displays is available, the range of which is largely connected to the culture the activity is embedded in.<sup>17</sup>

#### INTERRELATION ACROSS LAYERS: FRAME FORMULAS

To this point we have described the qualities of frame layers latent in a situation. Next we turn to describing how these layers relate to one another through what Goffman called “frame formulas” (1974, pp. 269–84). We argue that historical shifts in the organization of shared experience in situations are driven largely by changes in these formulas.

#### Natural Frame to Person Frame: The Body-Person Formula

Having a body is a necessary but not sufficient condition for being socially ratified as a person, and the “body-person” formula refers to the situational rules and norms by which certain bodies become ascribed with the qualities of personhood. There are two aspects of the body-person formula: the first dictates which categories of persons are salient and who is eligible for them; the second speaks to the relational norms and expectations of how these categories interrelate with each other. There are numerous transsituational factors involved in this process of sorting individuals into categories of personhood, not the least of which are institutionalized differences in power, status, and authority that allow some groups to force stigmatized notions of personhood onto other groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities).

The body-person formula helps us understand the high degree of cul-

<sup>17</sup> When looseness is not an inherent feature of the institutionalized role Goffman argues that it can be created through what he calls transformations. Transforming an institutionalized role frame does not mean a change in shared activity but, instead, that the same activity continues in a modified manner, perhaps less serious and more playful. Goffman called these types of frame transformation “keys.” Keys are a musical analogy and refer to an activity that “is transformed into something patterned on [itself], but seen by the participants to be something quite else” (1974, p. 44). Goffman identifies five types of keyings: make believe, games, ceremonies, technical redos, and regroundings.

tural and historical variation in the social distribution of personhood.<sup>18</sup> For example, Ballantyne and Burton (2005) argue that in early encounters with indigenous Americans, Europeans described them simply as “bodies” and that it was only over time that qualities of personhood were attributed to them. The denial of personhood need not, however, be this absolute. For instance, psychologists have found that people attribute quantitatively more person-like qualities to members of their own social group than to members of an out-group (Uleman et al. 2008). This includes perceiving in-group members as having more complex mental and emotional lives (Leyens et al. 2000; Demoulin et al. 2004). Even within a given social group attributions of personhood, or at least some of its elements, may be denied to certain members like the very young or the mentally handicapped (Dennett 1976).<sup>19</sup>

The body-person formula relates not only to the conditions under which full or partial attributions of personhood occur but also to distinctions between categories of persons.<sup>20</sup> These categories, which are culturally variable, are linked to theories about the attitudes, beliefs, values, affective reactions, behavioral norms, style of speech, and other shared qualities of their members (Stets and Burke 2000, p. 225). The meanings of person categories exist largely in relation to one another (e.g., male and female) and provide variable interactional opportunities based on associated differences in prestige and power (Hogg and Abrams 1988). This means that the person frame coordinates situational interaction partly in terms of a more or less rigid social hierarchy of person categories by rank, status, or order. The issue in terms of the situational ratification of these person categories is not just the stereotypes individuals carry around in their heads, but the forms of interaction through which shared expectations and interpretations about them generate common situational experience.

<sup>18</sup> Dennett (1976) points out that while we generally treat being a person and being a member of the human race as coextensive, that need not be the case—we could imagine, e.g., Martians who are persons but not humans, and we can think of times in the past (or even the present) when humanity was not an encompassing category. This is related to the fact that not only do we see cultural and historical variation in terms of who can be considered a person, we also see similar dramatic shifts in what we think are the defining features of personhood itself (Taylor 1989; Giddens 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Some moral philosophers such as Peter Singer (1975) argue that our interpretation of bodies as persons should extend to the bodies of at least some nonhuman animals as well.

<sup>20</sup> In contemporary Western culture, age, race, and gender remain the three most important person categories (Schneider 2004).

Person Frame to Institutionalized Role Frame:  
The Person-Role Formula

The formula for linking the person frame to the institutionalized role frame is called the person-role formula and has two aspects (Goffman 1974, p. 269). The first concerns the range of legitimate roles available in a given situation (e.g., it is almost always inappropriate to act like a bullfighter in a business meeting), and the second determines which persons are eligible for these roles (e.g., an adolescent in a classroom cannot claim the teacher role). Thus, the institutionalized role frame provides a constellation of available roles for a given activity and rules for claiming them. There are numerous limitations to role entry, but for much of human history a central one has been the categorical identities of the person frame. In other words, across different situations norms about who is eligible to claim certain roles are defined by cultural beliefs about personhood categories like gender, race, or age.<sup>21</sup>

A second facet of the person-role formula comes into play once actors have claimed or been filtered into roles, this one having to do with the norms of enactment. Two variable aspects of the institutionalized role frame help explain how this happens. First, depending on the nature of the institutional role frame, there are differing levels of cognitive and behavioral demand placed on the actor. The more an activity requires concentration and directed attention, the less room there is for actors to deviate from institutionalized scripts. In contrast, the less cognitively demanding an activity is the more it allows for alternative tracks of interaction to co-occur. Second, actors vary in their level of commitment to their roles. When enacting low-status roles there is incentive to bring in other aspects of individual identity or to reference more desirable roles that are not part of the present situation. Together, the demands of the role and the attachment and commitment of its incumbent create a space within which role-related behavior must stay in order to be understandable and legitimate.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Leifer (1988) describes situations in which actors engage in strategic interactions in order to secure high-status unclaimed roles. For our purposes what is important about Leifer's work is that actors strategically vying for roles do so with an awareness of which roles are available in a given situation and which roles they are eligible for. Leifer's actors are not fighting, in other words, to claim just any role but only those that they know are possible and permissible.

<sup>22</sup> The institutionalized role frame provides behavioral guidelines (and means for sanctioning violations), but actors still must rely on experience and interpretation outside of that frame layer. Importantly, institutionalized role frames vary greatly in terms of how much looseness they entail in terms of cognitive and behavioral demands; that is, the degree to which they require tight script conformity and allow for extra-role behavior (i.e., behavior not directly related to the fulfillment of role duties). While institutionalized role frames in "greedy" institutions (Cosser 1974) are unlikely to provide

### Role-Character Formula

Regardless of the reasons individuals engage in character displays, the range of legitimate behaviors is limited in important ways by what Goffman calls the “role-character formula” (1974, pp. 275–76). As mentioned previously, the institutionalized role frame anchors behavior in a given situated activity and as such the role-character formula dictates who can stylize roles, as well as how they can be stylized. There are two components to this. First, the status of certain roles allows for more variance in display of character. Theories of middle-status conformity suggest that the bottom and the top of status hierarchies have, for different reasons, greater freedom to engage in character displays (Blau 1964, pp. 53–55; Phillips and Zuckerman 2001). At the top, the attribution of success and power makes individual idiosyncrasies more acceptable and tolerated (Hollander 1958), while at the bottom actors have a motive to deviate because they derive few rewards from their position in the group or organization.

Second, different categories of persons are associated with culturally specific notions of appropriate stylized role enactments. The range of situationally legitimate character displays of emotion, for example, may differ depending on whether its incumbent is a man or a woman, a subordinate or a superordinate. The importance of the second factor, however, is limited by how prescriptive a given role is. More informal roles allow for more varied character displays, many of which will be constrained by the nature of the personal categories the actor is in. Like the other formulas already discussed, awareness of the role-character formula in both these facets is predicated on an understanding of the social structure in which it is embedded, here in terms of the structural distribution of legitimate emotional and character displays (Thoits 1989).

Finally, it is worth noting an important outcome of the fact that the character frame sensitizes us to the manner in which actors work to reinforce, repair, and flourish in situational interaction. If individuals and groups stylize their role performances and engage in character displays in a consistent and recognizable manner across social situations, then audiences will begin to attribute a personal identity (Goffman 1974, p. 117) or group style (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). This emergence of identity occurs even when the focus of the character frame is primarily maintaining situational order and not differentiating displays of self. Table 1 summarizes the key theoretical aspects of each type of frame.

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much space for creative behavior (what we call endogenous looseness), even in total institutions like asylums there is room for an under-life to develop (Goffman 1961). This means that role frames have endogenous characteristics that enable situational transformation and that participants can use interaction as a resource to transform situations even where roles are rigid. We will discuss this in the next section on the character frame.

TABLE 1  
KEY THEORETICAL ASPECTS OF EACH FRAME LAYER

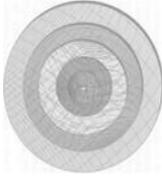
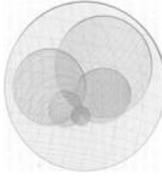
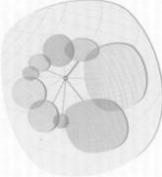
	Interpretational Focus	Perceived Source of Motivation	Frame Formula
Person frame	Others as representatives of person categories	Tradition and internal essences	Body person: Who can be a person and what kind of person can they be?
Role frame	Others as role incumbents	Rationality and practical needs	Person role: What roles are available and who is eligible to occupy them?
Character frame	Others as characters and personalities	Impulsivity and emotion	Role character: What kinds of character displays can those persons and roles present make?

#### HISTORICAL VIEW OF SOCIAL SITUATIONS

With theoretical constructs defined, we next attempt to place them in historical context. Most historical sociologists recognize the value of dividing time into analytic periods, even if their boundaries and defining characteristics are disputable (Haydu 1998). The potentially messy and contentious nature of creating categories of time is ideally addressed by a theoretical or empirical justification on the part of the researcher (e.g., using important turning points in the historical process being studied as a means of partitioning). Here our aim is different, and we draw on the broad sociological literature concerning premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity for demonstrative purposes. The examples below were chosen to show the utility of our framework for describing shared experience in historically diverse situations. For future empirical work the framework we offer will always need to be filled in with specific knowledge of the larger sociocultural context within which the situation takes place (i.e., ideas about persons, roles, identities, and the formulas that link situational layers).

Moreover, and as alluded to earlier, the distinctions between premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity become more useful when we treat them as overlapping and not discrete categories (Smart 1992) that can each describe coexisting arenas of interaction within the contemporary world (see table 2). Our description of a postmodern social situation below, for example, may be useful for understanding interaction in service and information industries but not in manufacturing ones. Similarly, we can see that the experience with different types of social situations is not evenly

TABLE 2  
 NETWORK STRUCTURE AND SITUATIONAL LAYERING BY EPOCH

	Premodernity	Modernity	Postmodernity
Network structure	Concentric networks 	Overlapping networks 	Spoke structure 
Person frame	Persons as representatives of castes and orders ( <i>primary layer of focus</i> )	Persons as rational and autonomous	Persons as unique and reflexive
Role frame	Roles as reflections of customs and cultures in traditional institutions	Roles as differentiated functions for practical action in rational institutions ( <i>primary layer of focus</i> )	Roles as vehicles for ongoing project of self-construction in fluid institutions
Character frame	Character displays as showing reverence for social order	Character displays as maintaining institutional order and differentiating the self	Character displays as demonstrating social skill and mobilizing interaction ( <i>primary layer of focus</i> )

SOURCE.—Graphics are from Pescosolido and Rubin (2000).

distributed across structural hierarchies.<sup>23</sup> In the sections below we turn our attention to describing a particular situation from, in the broadest sense, premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity. More specifically, we look at specific situations in legal settings because interaction there is focused on social order and the repair of normative ruptures and thereby lets us get at underlying logics more clearly. We do so by first exploring the nature of each situational frame individually and then examining how they interrelate to create a situational gestalt.

### Premodernity

Despite the heterogeneity of societies that fall under the vast umbrella of “premodernity” we use the term here as shorthand to refer broadly to contexts in which behavior was heavily prescribed by contingent and local customs and interaction primarily served to ensure the maintenance of an underlying social order often thought to be divine in origin (Giddens 1991; Taylor 2002). The success of social performances in premodern situations was determined by the degree to which they validated the rigid hierarchies of social orders and estates. The conservative nature of interaction helped to minimize risk and danger both within society and from the unknown world that surrounded it (Bauman 1995; Giddens 1999). This provided premoderns with a strong sense of security, but they paid a steep price for this in the form of extreme restrictions on their autonomy.

According to Simmel, the high degree of social constraint in premodern societies was partly a result of the configuration of its relationships. Individuals were embedded in a series of social networks that formed concentric circles (Simmel 1955, p. 147; Pescosolido and Rubin 2000). One of the important implications of this network form is that membership at one level (e.g., family) implied membership at the next highest (e.g., tribe). Each affiliation was reinforced through its interlocking nature with the others. The result of this embedding of affiliations was a single stable generalist identity that was played and validated across numerous situations. Legitimate social performances were those that demonstrated the individual’s fidelity not only to this single generalized role but also to the socially sanctioned relationships between the representatives of different person categories present in the situation.

<sup>23</sup> Many scholars have argued that these structural changes are associated with transitions felt in elite positions and only later experienced by the rest of society. We can see this with the advent of modern individualism among Florentine elites (McLean 1998, 2007) and the therapeutic culture of postmodernity among midcentury professional classes (Reisman [1950] 1969).

*Person frame.*—The person frame was the primary situational layer for organizing shared experience in premodern interaction. Categories of personhood were the most important source of social differentiation, and the role behaviors and character displays associated with other frame layers reinforced them. For this reason the body-person formula in premodernity was rigid and ritually protected.<sup>24</sup> Bodies were sorted into clearly bounded categories of personhood, and these categories were understood to be reflective of essential and indelible aspects of the identities of their members. The motives and interests of interactional partners were interpreted primarily in terms of their position in the social structure of society (Elias 1978). With participants understood as representatives of their castes or orders, everyday encounters consisted of ceremonial and codified interaction rituals that solidified the hierarchical boundaries between categories of persons. Shared situational experience came from mutual understanding and awareness of the ritualized rules for contact between and within rigid categories of personhood.

*Institutionalized role frame.*—The embedded nature of social networks meant that all roles played by an individual were manifestations of a single generalized identity that was reinforced across diverse types of encounters. The importance of the institutionalized role frame in premodernity, then, lies in the fact that individuals generally did not make a distinction between their “natural selves” and the roles they played. Unlike in later time periods, premoderns did not enter and exit different roles as they moved across situations. This is not to say that individuals always liked their place in the social order but, rather, that it was difficult for both actors and audiences to conceptually separate role incumbency from personal identity.<sup>25</sup> The importance of the institutionalized role frame is that it provided the schematic understanding of what a particular generalized role should do in any given situation. In every encounter these scripts coordinated interaction such that the status order of the persons present was acknowledged and sustained. Pragmatic goals in a situation were always subservient to this maintenance of transsituational order.

*Character frame.*—Like the role frame, in premodern encounters the

<sup>24</sup> The presence of coming of age rituals across many premodern societies is reflective of this rigid boundary between person categories. An individual passed out of the category of childhood and into the category of adulthood only through a discrete ceremony performed by authorized community leaders.

<sup>25</sup> The importance of this tightly coupled relationship between person and role is reflected in the fact that premodern myth and fantasy is heavily concerned with upending it. The Carnival, e.g., is a liminal fantasy world where the status hierarchy is inverted and social subordinates take on the manners and styles of superordinates (Bahktin 1984). Such subversions only happened, however, in the temporary worlds of play and imagination.

character frame also served to reinforce the transsituational structure of person categories. Character displays were highly ritualized and codified and not only maintained order within social groups but also helped to differentiate across them (Elias 1978). And yet even lacking the conditions thought to be central to the development of reflexivity in later time periods, premoderns were far from cultural dopes. The situations they found themselves in may have been highly structured to reproduce an underlying social order, but individuals were still required to make efforts to sustain and protect it from problems. Moreover, character work was also a way for premoderns to acquire status or honor and to differentiate themselves from members of their own class. Importantly, the role-character formula defined the particular cultural rules for these claims and thereby created rigid class-specific boundaries for legitimate and understandable displays. And while this may not have left a great deal of room for the premodern to maneuver, they could nonetheless use character displays as a tool to gain favor, as a means for fostering useful relationships, and as a weapon for attacking the honor of their enemies.

*Example situation.*—To demonstrate the usefulness of the multilayered framework for understanding an example of premodern interaction we apply it to a particular legal situation. As Shaw discusses, the county court in medieval England was a space in which the community could engage in formal restoration of ruptures to the social order (2005). Such ruptures may have been the result of property crime or theft but often were born of breaches in the honor ethic that defined much of premodern life. The excerpt below is from the court record of a case from the year 1443. The plaintiff, Richard Bourdeaux, was a blacksmith and one of the city's most prestigious noncivic leaders, and the defendant was William Webbe, a lower-status butcher. Bourdeaux charged that Webbe had insulted him in public, a charge the court confirmed:

On this day in the burgesses' hall, at the court of the master and all the burgesses, William Webbe, butcher, conceded that he had spoken badly and harmfully of Richard Bourdeaux. For this reason, the said William begged the said Richard, out of respect for God and for charity's sake, in view of the entire meeting, that he earnestly hoped he would pardon him his abusive language and the slander he had spoken. Then the said Richard, at the request of the master and burgesses, remitted and relaxed to the said William all the said fine and evil deed on condition that he never in the future publicly or openly say or proclaim defamatory words about Richard, such as he previously spoke so violently and harmfully, on threat of 40s. sterling to be paid to the current or future Master within two weeks of the relapse. And the said money should be applied to the restoration of St. Cuthbert's Church. (Shaw 2005, p. 127)

On its surface the complaint brought by Bourdeaux concerned a personal insult made by Webbe, but within the court the case was primarily framed as a disruption of the social order and a threat to the status hierarchy of the town. That the crime was seen as being about violating social order in general, as much as being an affront against Bourdeaux in particular, is evident in the ruling's articulation of the insult as being an offense against God as well as the fact that part of the penance ordered to be given was to the collective in the form of charity to the church. The centrality of the plaintiff and defendant's professions in the case is also evidence of the degree to which premodern interaction was grounded in protecting predefined relationships between singular generalized roles that spread across diverse situations. This case serves, in other words, not only to repair a rupture between Webbe and Bourdeaux but also to protect and validate the structural relationships between the categories of people like Webbe and Bourdeaux.

In terms of the institutionalized role frame we can see that it serves the same purpose it does throughout all the periods we describe by providing behavioral scripts for a particular strip of activity. In this case, that meant rule-following knowledge about the highly codified and ritualized behavior necessary for successful interaction in court. Unlike in later periods, however, the behavioral logics of premodern institutionalized role frames were not self-justifying in terms of rationality or efficacy. Instead, their persistence was due to their facility in reinforcing the underlying social structure of person categories as described above. In this situation, however, we can see not only typified actors from cultural categories or even role incumbents fulfilling scripted behavioral expectations but also William Webbe and Richard Bourdeaux engaged in a particular and contingent dispute over their honor. For these two, or any individuals in premodern situations, for character displays to be legitimate they need be seen as being in fidelity with the actor's place in the social order. For this reason being successful in disputes over honor was predicated, at least partly, on the ability of disputants to justify their position by appealing to cultural beliefs about what persons like them (and their opponents) should or should not do.

### Modernity

Similar to premodernity, the concept of modernity is used to describe a broad and extremely heterogeneous swath of time. The constraints of this article allow us to focus on only a few of the most important social changes that can be found in even the most diverse definitions of modernity. In terms of our interest in changes in social situations, there are two modern transformations that stand out. First was the emerging view of the individual

as independent and rational, something Taylor called the most important outcome of modernity (1989). Second is the still ongoing erosion of traditional forms of authority and meaning as they are replaced by rationality as the ideal basis for decision making and social organization. Rational activity differs from traditional forms because of its future-directed orientation and concern with creating and imposing achieved order rather than just conserving existing structures (Bauman 1991). As we will discuss below, these transformations resulted in the institutionalized role frame becoming the primary situation layer for organizing shared experience. It is there that situations are understood as being composed of rational individuals mobilized into cooperative practical activity.

Simmel described these changes partly in terms of the shift from the concentric circles of premodern social networks to a pattern of overlapping networks within modernity (Simmel 1955; Pescosolido and Rubin 2000). The modern actor, increasingly unmoored from traditional forms of association, comes to have memberships in multiple networks, some chosen and some ascribed. This new pattern of relationships leads to both an increase in the number of distinct and bounded roles played by actors and a decrease in the multiplexity of any particular social tie. The modern self stands at the intersection of these overlapping networks and is capable of playing multiple distinct roles while preserving its essential unity (an achievement questioned in postmodernity). Simmel argued that this situation creates a problematic tension for the individual between the aspiration to differentiate and create a unique self and the desire to conform and preserve the security of membership in the social group (Simmel 1950).

*Person frame.*—In modernity personhood came to be seen as more than just a reflection of membership in discrete social categories. Instead there emerged a view of the “authentic” person who stood behind the roles she played. Personhood came to be related to a view of the individual as inwardly motivated and independent of roles and social categories. This led to a major shift in the body-person formula as the boundaries between categories of personhood became more porous, although they certainly did not fully dissolve. Never fully realized, the modern ideal is that all individuals are members of the same category of rational and autonomous personhood and as such enjoy the same rights and freedoms (Frank and Meyer 2002). This decoupling of personhood and role in modernity affected the nature of situational coordination. As personhood became more universalized and less differentiated the person frame faded into the background of interaction. Social coordination based on categories of personhood was conservative and inflexible, but the changing conditions of modernity required interaction that was rational and reflexive.

*Institutionalized role frame.*—In modern situations, then, the institutionalized role frame takes on the central function of coordinating shared

experience. While premodern societies relied heavily on tradition to regulate social life, modern societies came to see order as an unfolding process under the control of humans. Smooth interaction in modern contexts comes not from individuals' playing parts in community rituals but rather from their adopting roles in abstract and rationalized systems. As encounters became more complex and actors had to face more situational ambiguity and novelty, straightforward role enactments became more difficult. This meant a growing necessity for individuals to make practical judgments and rational decisions as they coordinate with others.

These conditions are related to two major changes in the person-role formula. First, modernity saw a sharp increase in the ability of actors to choose certain (but certainly not all) of their roles. As roles come to be more freely chosen they are increasingly decoupled from personhood and are seen not just as manifestations of an individual's contingent location in social structure but also as a reflection of personal taste and preferences. Second, because of this decoupling the orientation that actors take toward their role in a given situation becomes an important tool for constructing and displaying a personal identity. The modern desire for individuation, to feel like and be seen as more than one's roles, means actors become increasingly conscious of their performances because they know that the way they enact a role may be taken by audiences as a reflection of their true self.

*Character frame.*—The primary function of the character frame in modern situations is to reinforce the rational order of the role frame and smooth over interactional problems within it. The decoupling of personhood and role discussed above has two major implications for the nature of the role-character formula in modern interaction. First, certain rules of character display became linked to the emerging universalized understanding of personhood and not to particular categories of persons. All members of society, regardless of rank, are expected to internalize these norms and follow them across all situations (Elias 1978). These are rules for character displays between persons, and the roles being played at particular moments of interaction are incidental to them. Second, other character displays come to be associated with particular roles and not with the person playing them. These are rules for character displays that hold only for those moments when the individual is in the particular role. These are norms that are attached to the roles of particular situations and are independent of the persons in it.

Unlike in premodernity, however, character displays also become a means for individual differentiation and the asserting of a unique self. This happens both in terms of legitimate displays of self within the role as well shows of resistance to it. In both cases the character frame becomes a central site for the modern actor to try and ease the pull of this tension

between individuation and conformity (Simmel 1950). Legitimate displays occur when they are anchored in the rules of the institutionalized role frame. Here character displays are laminated on role performances such that they demonstrate personal style or manner through the successful completion of rational tasks. Resistance happens when actors use the flexibility of interaction to make character displays that signal their distance from the role or their lack of commitment to it.

*Example situation.*—Our example of a modern situation is drawn from Brickey and Miller's (1975) ethnography of the routine operation of a traffic court. Similar to our premodern example of a dispute over honor, minor courts represent the place individuals are most likely to have direct contact with the legal system. Since few defendants retained lawyers their interaction with the judge, who directly represented the state, was typically unmediated. The judges in this particular courtroom opened each session by saying: "The traffic court of the city of — is now in session. As I read your name please step forward. The charges against you will then be read. At that time you will be asked to enter a plea of either guilty or not guilty. If the plea is not guilty, the court will set a time and place for trial and you will be ordered to post bond. If you plead guilty the court will assess a judgment against you which you will pay before leaving" (Brickey and Miller 1975, p. 690). Two major changes associated with modernity mentioned in previous sections greatly changed the nature of the social situations, as we can see in this example. First, modernity was marked by a replacement of personal obligations with impersonal and rationalized rule-based interaction. Connected to this was a shift in the reference of interaction away from the local polity and its traditions and authority toward abstract systems of roles and bureaucratic authority. Because there is no shared belief in a particular underlying social order of persons, collective embracement of the logics of the institutionalized role frame serves the same purpose by providing a common base for organizing shared experience.<sup>26</sup>

Following the institutionalized rules for role behavior was enough to

<sup>26</sup> This reliance on the institutionalized role frame as the grounding for interaction can, however, become problematic or disrupted. As Brickey and Miller (1975) report, not everyone entering the situation understands exactly what their role entails or knows the behavioral script they are expected to follow. Defendants would report to the researchers that they had been unsure of the behavior expected of them and so would watch and mimic the behavior of the defendants who were called before the court before them (and court was set up in such a way as to allow for all behavior to be public, thereby helping ensure that those waiting in the wings could witness proper role behavior). They had to, in other words, bootstrap their way into understanding their role in the institutionalized frame. Doing so required interpreting what they saw against the background knowledge they brought in order to know what was relevant to successful enactment of the role of defendant.

ensure understandable and intelligible behavior, but successfully fighting a traffic ticket required more. When defendants attempted to explain their behavior using narratives of their behavior that corresponded with the judge's typifications of standard accounts, he was unmoved. That is, when a defendant used familiar explanations the judge combined the person and institutionalized role frames to see the interaction as "normal" and not requiring extra attention. If, however, defendants gave a nonnormal account for their behavior, one that did not fit his typifications, the judge shifted interpretation to the character frame. The point here is that much of interaction in modern social situations is understood through role behavior and is grounded in abstract and rationalized systems. Individuals in those generic roles can orient behavior toward the character frame when interaction becomes problematic or when there is room or need to display aspects of self and face. In such cases, though, understandability and intelligibility require, as in the case with traffic court defendants pleading the particularistic nature of their circumstances, grounding that narrative in the logics of institutionalized roles.

#### Postmodern Situations

Post- or late modernity has the clearest boundaries of the three epochs we look at if only because its reach is the narrowest. Discussions of this period typically concern the impact of particular social transformations occurring over the last 40–60 years, although the roots of postmodernity are often traced further back. Perhaps the most constant features of different definitions of postmodernity are a rejection of grand narratives, distrust of the modern vision of constant progress, and a loss of faith in rational and scientific knowledge (Harvey 1989; Jameson 1991). As shared foundations of meaning recede, the relationship of the person and the collective is inverted as society comes to be seen as existing to serve the interests of the individual. Perception and interpretation of others becomes particularistic, and so coordination requires more effort as the ability to rely on person typifications or role expectations to predict the behavior of others diminishes.

Building off Simmel, Pescosolido and Rubin (2000) describe the network structure of this postmodern society as one in which the individual acts as a spoke that bridges various disparate networks. Within such a condition the postmodern individual constantly moves between unconnected identities and roles and because of this has weak social ties that are ephemeral and uniplex (Smith-Lovin 2007). As individuals come to be spread across numerous practices and situations, their identity becomes more fluid and flexible. As these conditions continue to spread, a sense of fragmentation can grow, and personal meaning must be cobbled to-

gether from bits of each area of life. Interaction in postmodern social situations aims to deal with these contingencies. This means the character frame takes on new importance as the primary frame for organizing shared experience.

*Person frame.*—The person frame fades further into the background of postmodern situations as it becomes less important for immediate situated interaction. The postmodern ideal is one in which there are no categories of personhood at all but only singular and distinct individuals. Importantly, while this sense of unique personhood becomes increasingly universalized, it also moves away from the view of the self as rational, whole, and authentic that helped define modernity. No longer taken for granted, personhood becomes an idiosyncratic category to be constructed by the individual through ongoing acts of creativity and imagination. Traditional categories of personhood are still present, but the individual has more freedom to selectively choose the degree to which they embrace these identities and the manner in which they are displayed (Waters 1990).

*Institutionalized role frame.*—Roles remain important for coordinating shared activities in postmodern situations, but their prescriptive power diminishes as the need and desire for flexibility and creativity grow (Lash 1990). This changes the person-role formula in a manner that has implications for both social coordination and personal identity. As the situations actors encounter become increasingly underdetermined the importance of informality grows as a means for maintaining flexibility (Miztal 2000). Roles remain necessary in order to ensure at least a minimal level of predictability and legitimacy in shared activities, but they become increasingly temporary and adaptable and can be discarded when no longer useful. Roles cease to be a means for solidifying a traditional or rational order but, instead, become tools used by individuals to provisionally coordinate their own personal projects and plans.

The discardability of roles also serves to diminish their identity-defining force. The ongoing processes of individuation make it far less acceptable to assign roles based on social categories instead of the individual's autonomous inclinations and preferences. Moreover, as the number of roles and identities grows, self-identity comes to be understood not in terms of any particular role but rather as the individual's unique combination of them. This means that any single role an actor possesses is less likely to be central to their identity than was true in the past. In the postmodern world, where people change careers multiple times, are spread across heterogeneous networks of interest, and engage in ongoing projects of self-reinvention, roles become like hats that can be taken on and off without threatening personal identity.

*Character frame.*—From modernity to postmodernity we see a shift in the perceived primary source of motivation for social performances. In

traditional and modern societies behavior is understood as externally motivated by tradition and institutions. In postmodern contexts this changes to the internal impulses and preferences of the individual (Turner 1976). These are understood and interpreted primarily through the character frame, and for this reason it becomes the primary organizing frame in postmodern situations. The nature of the role-character formula also changes in postmodernity. As roles become less prescriptive, interaction becomes increasingly concerned with immediate experience, and a greater range of emotional and character displays can be legitimately expressed. It is not the case, however, that there are no limits on such displays. This growing freedom is predicated on the internalization of rules of respect for others and assumptions about the self-control of interaction partners (Elias 1978; Wouters 1986). The obligation to construct a unique self is matched with the duty to allow others to do the same.

Beyond its central role in the postmodern project of constructing a self out of various styles and tastes, the character frame takes on new importance for the coordination of collective activities as well. Lacking the more deterministic rituals and routines found in traditional social orders or rational role system, collective action in postmodern situations requires a more complex and fluid mode of mobilization. First, successful activities entail not only aligning role relationship but also coordinating the diverse identities, interests, and motivations of participants in such a way that individuals feel respected and group goals are achieved. Moreover, the trust and reliability necessary for such complex coordination can less easily be assumed. Instead, they are the results of ongoing negotiation, and individuals not only need to signal that they possess these requisite interactional qualities, they must also make greater efforts to detect them in others.

*Example situation.*—Again using a legal example, we now turn to a postmodern situation, this one involving legal mediation. In the past several decades the use of mediation as an alternative means of dispute resolution has rapidly grown (Morrill, in press). Part of the justification for this growth comes from the decidedly modernist argument that mediation is more efficient and cheaper than adjudicated dispute resolution, thereby unburdening the court. The other arguments for mediation have, however, a more postmodern flavor to them, namely, that alternative dispute resolution is a means of community social transformation and, reflecting a therapeutic disposition, provides opportunities for individual growth and development (Dukes, Pisolish, and Stephens 2000). Importantly, mediation is a pragmatic means of dispute resolution in that the goal is to reach agreements that are mutually beneficial to the disputing parties, whatever those agreements might be. In comparison to the pre-modern court case in which the interactional goal was the repair of a

disruption to the social order or the modern traffic court where behavior was geared toward efficiency and maintaining a rationalized and abstract moral code, in our postmodern example of mediation, interaction is to meet the needs of individuals. A mediator discusses the style of mediation and references a case:

I look for peoples' concerns, the reasons why this issue is important to each of them, and try to create an environment where they feel safe enough to articulate that concern. I do this by being open and nonjudgmental, by genuinely listening to their feelings, and letting them feel that their feelings have been heard and trying to get the other party to hear them. I focus on trying to get the other party to hear what is behind the other's manifest position. If they do hear this concern, it is relatively easy to come up with an agreement. In one case, for example, between a tenant and a sublessee, the real concerns had nothing to do with the resolution. I suspected there were other concerns when they went over the list of damages [which the tenant charged against the people who had sublet the apartment] and they could agree on all the big money issues but not on any of the small ones. (Harrington and Merry 1988, p. 726)

In a postmodern context in which shared narratives cannot be assumed, the job of the mediator can be thought of as the management of participants' stories. Within the mediation framework there is no moral code that the mediator has to ensure is met by the participants' decision. Rather, a successful outcome is one in which the dispute narratives of the participants (and the individual moral order they are embedded in) are transformed in such a way as to construct a new, shared narrative that is agreeable to all parties. The comparison here is with the premodern situation in which interaction was largely a routinized reflection of a belief in an underlying order, and the institutionalized role and character frame layers of situations contained behavior and interpretation that sustained that. Here in the postmodern situation, in contrast, the primary situational layer of focus is the character frame. In premodern legal battles involving honor, individuals ground behavior in shared person frames in order to make interaction meaningful. In mediational settings actors do the inverse—they, through ongoing negotiation, constantly work to create secure footing for interaction where postmodernity has swept it away.

This does not mean, however, that social situations in postmodern context should be seen as being constructed anew in every interaction. The person and institutionalized role frames still play significant roles in structuring interaction. While the roles of mediator and mediation participants are not nearly as prescriptive as roles in more formal legal contexts, they still structure interaction in important ways. There are many organizational aspects of mediation that differentiate it from the kind of informal third person mediation that is a common occurrence in families or even

workplaces. Mediators are certified and thus have undergone a professional training, and in this context of professionalism certain common logics can be seen as constitutive of the practice, notably those involving rules of neutrality. The institutionalized role frame therefore points us to the underlying organizational and behavioral rules that structure the narrative reconstructive aim of mediation. Rules of turn taking, physical spacing, norms of language use, and emotional display all add to a participatory framework rooted in the role frame of mediation.

This continuing role of the institutionalized role frame in providing behavioral scripts and rules is important because it helps us understand why postmodern social situations can be less structured yet still grounded in a shared reality. Perhaps most importantly, in premodernity and modernity trust resided in stable systems, either of tradition or rationalized abstract rules. In both cases, though via different mechanisms, these systems gave actors a stable reference point toward which they could orient behavior. What changes in the less-institutionalized settings of postmodernity is that this stability gives way to situational contingency, and so trust becomes something that must be constantly achieved and re-achieved, what Giddens (1994) refers to as the idea of “active trust.” That is, in postmodern situations trust can no longer proceed from shared community membership as in premodernity or the predictability of role performance as in modernity, but rather its establishment must be worked for in contingent situations. Still, this process remains grounded in other situational layers, even if the nature of that grounding has changed.

#### REALITY AND FUTURE OF SITUATIONS

The above discussion raises an important question about the reality of the historical changes in situations that we have described. As already argued, we see the experience of a situation as a gestalt. While actors may manipulate frames or interpretively move between them, the multiple layers of a situation are generally experienced in a nonreflective and holistic manner. We should ask, then, whether these frames, and the historical variability we describe in their content and interrelation, are representative of actual social reality or are collective fictions reinforced through habitual ratification. At the risk of seeming to elide the question, our answer is that they are both. In a sense we are appealing to the Thomas dictum (i.e., “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”; Thomas and Thomas 1928) but also to Goffman’s caveat that “[the] statement is true as it reads but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress. . . . Ordinarily, all

[actors] do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly” (Goffman 1974, pp. 1–2).

By this Goffman meant that attempts to change the definition of a situation may have negligible effects—say, the embarrassment of the individual attempting and failing to alter reality—but aside from minor negotiations the requirements of the situations are largely set long before the individual walks into them. Goffman’s rejoinder, we think, aligns nicely with our view on the reality of the ideal-type frame-layered situations we describe in this article. Structural and social forces compel certain historical patterns of interaction rooted in normative beliefs about appropriate and legitimate behavior (e.g., rationality in modernity). The result is a shared self-reinforcing narrative. A situational gestalt is largely preestablished and is arrived at through the claims of those present, and interaction that follows generally serves to sustain it. This does not mean that interaction is easy (although it may be highly habitual) but, rather, that it is composed of an iterative, interrelated process of actors orienting and reorienting themselves, both interpersonally and temporally, to each other and to the shared activity of the situation.

The key is that reality, even if arrived at through a process of bootstrapping, requires general consensus—otherwise we call it the delusion of the individual. From our vantage point we can, of course, look back historically and recognize that much of what passed for reality in the past was in fact a fiction, but to see this from the inside is far more difficult. The reality and fictitious nature of situational frames are intimately connected, then, but still analytically distinct even if this distinction can often only be seen from a temporal distance.<sup>27</sup> We can see this clearly in the court cases presented in earlier sections. Each case reflects historically and culturally specific notions of the law, yet individuals entering into those situations were still bound by their rules. William Webbe, for instance, need not have believed in the divine nature of order in the medieval English countryside, but to have any chance at winning his case he was compelled to act as if he did, and by doing so he would help reinforce its narrative “reality.”

Much of the time, however, this is not a problem because the reality and rhetorics of situations are tightly coupled. Partly this is because the need for high levels of consensus in order to achieve shared activities makes it difficult to depart from the arrangement and nature of situational frames. There are, of course, moments when these two become decoupled, yet outside of large-scale transformations and structural turning points it

<sup>27</sup> In *FA* Goffman offers a similar relationship between the reality and rhetoric of frames when he writes, “indeed, in countless ways and ceaselessly, social life takes up and freezes into itself the understandings we have of it” (1974, p. 563).

is difficult to sustain serious rhetorical departures from the consensus about reality. How exactly actors and groups do manage to challenge dominant rhetorics, and sustain such challenges, is an important next step in this work and requires more of a focus on dynamic processes than we have given in this article.

Importantly, challenging a dominant rhetoric also means understanding and acknowledging its “reality” insofar as its being the grounds for legitimate interaction. That is, for a counterclaim about situations to be successful it must recognize the existing dominant narrative and use it as a starting point. This is, we think, why our structural view of situations adds an important and necessary dimension to the more processual view of frames found in the social movements literature. Successful counterclaims about interactional gestalts never challenge every aspect of interaction, only certain parts. And to be understandable and meaningful, challenges need to reflect awareness of the situational order and its moral underpinnings.<sup>28</sup> This also means that the degree to which orientations in a situation can depart from a gestalt consensus is heavily tied to the structural nature of the situation itself.

So what is the trajectory of social situations going into the future? With the picture we have drawn so far we could imagine several possible scenarios. First, it might be the case that growing levels of informality have generated only incremental variations in situations. That is, the transformations ascribed to postmodernity are vastly overstated, and what we see in the contemporary world are only minor injections of informality into what are otherwise still highly structured situations. This would suggest a future not so different than the present. A second possibility, and the one predicted by Weber, is that the rationalizing process of modernity continues until it ultimately undermines itself by sweeping away all rationales for collective order. At that point there will be nothing left to generate shared reality, and we will enter a phase of what Weber describes as re-enchantment in which people live, side by side, in incommensurate lifeworlds, a scenario he compared to a return to polytheism (1946).<sup>29</sup> That is, the trajectory we describe of increasing fragmentation continues until situations become completely independent and decoupled from each other.

<sup>28</sup> Conversely, this conceptualization may offer another way of thinking about psychosis, Asperger’s syndrome, and other mental health issues that problematize routine social interaction. Within this framework we can see such conditions as related to systematic situational misframings and misalignment between frame layers.

<sup>29</sup> A more contemporary version of this Weberian disenchantment can be seen in the work of Philip Rieff (2006). Rieff wrote about post- or late modernity in terms of what he called “third-world culture,” which he defined almost exclusively in terms of its nihilistic rejection of all visions of sacred order inherited from previous epochs.

Finally, a third possibility is that the current state of post- or late modernity is the end of a social cycle, a Kuhnian moment of paradigm breakdown that will eventually reach a new equilibrium through the emergence of a different type of order (Kuhn 1962). This possibility would lead us to ask about the end of major civilizations and if the final days of, for instance, the Roman or Greek empires were preceded by a period of rhetorical and structural decoupling much like some see in the condition of the contemporary world. Again, though, in posing these three possible scenarios we run up against the limitation of not possessing a historical theory of situations—we cannot answer questions about how much situations are actually changing or about the direction and nature of change until we explore them more systematically and comparatively.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In this article we have elaborated Goffman's work in *FA* in order to offer a new means of conceptualizing experience in social situations and how that experience can be regarded differently across settings and epochs. In effect, we have afforded a more elaborate and systematic understanding of shared situational reality as being both culturally predefined and an ongoing intersubjective construction. Toward this end we extend Goffman's notion of primary frameworks by offering a conceptual framework drawn from *FA*, contemporary social theory, and cognitive research. We also extend Goffman's ideas on how interpretive frames are interrelated by describing translation processes across layers (frame formulas) and how layered frames are experienced as a seamless gestalt. Last, we present this view of frames in a way that makes comparative analysis of social situations feasible and relate historical examples of legal situations to demonstrate the utility of our framework. The current lack of a historical theory of social situations presents several problems for sociological theory, not the least of which is an inability to discuss how broad historical forces affect situational interaction along with the difficulty of speculating about possible future historical trajectories for situations. Our structural theory of situations as multilayered frames is a theoretical bridge that opens up several potential lines of new research and thought we think are worth pursuing.

First, it opens up the possibility for more systematic cross-cultural work on situations. Situations as multilayered frames offer a means not only to compare consistent elements across various types of situations in the form of frames but also to compare at different levels (e.g., situations across particular cultures may be more similar at certain frame layers than others). This approach allows us to expand on cross-cultural soci-

ology that looks at diffuse notions like differing cultural repertoires (Lamont and Thevenot 2000) or tool kits (Swidler 1986) and analytically disaggregate them to see how they systematically condition interaction across various situations.

Second, and related, is that just as with cross-cultural work this framework allows for comparing situations across historical periods. The key challenge here would be to see if our conceptual scheme helps us better explain actual historical empirical phenomena. We hinted at such a possibility in our discussion of court situations across historical epochs, but this is only the tip of a potential research iceberg. This line of research could look at the role of changes in frame formulas over time and how they affect the nature of situated interaction. A central question here would be, Can we tie major historical turning points to changes in frame formulas?

A third line of research could look at the relationship between the structure of situations and the social processes that occur within them. This might mean collective and ritual work, such as Collins's *Interaction Ritual Chains* (1981, 2005), and examining how actors collectively orient themselves through time. Successful ritualistic collective behavior requires a shared grounding to make interaction meaningful, and so we see the relationship between the structure of situations and the sociotemporal structure of the rituals that happen in them as having an orthogonal relationship. This line could also look at processes of bootstrapping in situations, such as Leifer's work on getting action (1988). Here we see actors using their position and understanding in one frame to strategically occupy positions in another. The focus here would be on how ambiguity, uncertainty, or incompleteness at one frame level is worked out by referencing and bootstrapping lower ones.

A related line of research could look at how and when the structure of situations and the rhetorics that sustain them become decoupled. Here we would try and understand the ways in which the shared reality of situations is challenged and the kinds of circumstances under which such challenges succeed. This would mean systematically looking at the ways actors use the legitimacy and understandability of shared situational reality as a base from which to launch disputations of that reality. We alluded to this previously by pointing out the importance of linking the processual view of social movements frames to the structural frames of the situations in which they are employed.

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