Goffman's *Asylums* and contemporary ethics

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Erving Goffman's *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, first published in 1961, has stood the test of time and is still regarded as one of the most important social science texts written on mental health. Yet, due to strict ethical standards, contemporary academics are warned against conducting similar research. This text examines the approach Goffman adopted when conducting his *Asylums* study considering perspectives on research ethics today. In such a way, this feature contributes to debates regarding Goffman's ethics and, more broadly, contemporary ethical approaches to social science research.

Introduction

Goffman was awarded his PhD in 1953 and procured funding from the National Institute of Mental Health to undertake covert ethnographic research at a psychiatric hospital. Goffman's field work was to last for twelve months, from 1955–1956, at St. Elizabeth's in Washington DC, which housed over 7,000 patients. As stated by Goffman, his 'immediate object in doing field work at St. Elizabeth's was to try to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate' (1971, p.7). In order for him to achieve his objective, he assumed the position of an assistant to the hospital's athletic director, and his true researcher role was only known by 'the top hospital management' (ibid.).

Asylums was the end result of this research. The book was published in 1961, five years after Goffman's magnum opus, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*. At the time of its publication, *Asylums* was well-received by academic readers and it helped trigger an intellectual movement known as 'antipsychiatry' that, in its most basic sense, viewed psychiatry as doing more harm than good.

Antipsychiatry is far less prevalent than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, largely due to 'advances in psychiatry and neurobiology in elucidating the etiological basis of a number of mental disorders' (Berlim et al., 2003, p.63). Nonetheless, *Asylums* attained and retained 'classic status due to its extensive academic citation, anthology reprinting, use in legal proceedings, and public influence' (Weinstein, 1994, p.348). Additionally, it is still considered a core text on academic programmes, as posited by Cummins (2020, p.17): '[it] is, or should be, on the reading list for every mental health module on social work, sociology and social policy courses'.

For Cummins, one of the reasons that *Asylums* remains widely read is because 'it examines how response to mental health illness becomes a form of social control' (ibid). In *Asylums*, Goffman presents the concept of the 'total institution', that is, '…a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from wider society for an appropriate period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life' (Goffman, 1971, p.11). Hence, the book, while focusing on the total institution of the psychiatric hospital and the control of the patients, had broader implications for other institutions, including: prisons; universities; boarding schools; orphanages; care homes; monasteries; nunneries; military barracks; etc.

The *Asylums* study, as Cummins asserted, was also 'a landmark in ethnographic research' (2020, p.15). Albeit, Goffman's research method, covert ethnography, is 'controversial' (Calvey, 2017, p.1). As explained by O'Reilly (2009, p.46): 'Covert research has now become far less common, partly as a result of a series of heated debates about ethical implications…'. Universities and academic associations now tend to recommend that covert research is avoided. As Spicker (2011, p.118) noted: 'Students are being advised not to undertake such research'. This is echoed by McKechnie (2008, p.133): 'The ethical guidelines for most of the major social sciences scholarly associations advise against the use of covert methods'.

The debates that O'Reilly (2009) referred to concern the implementation of strict ethical codes by universities and academic associations that shape research communities (Bridges, 2017, p.301). These codes are designed to safeguard all parties affiliated with research, and because of this 'it is doubtful [Goffman's study] would get through an ethics committee today' (Mac Suibhne, 2011, p.1). The research's key issues are as follows: Goffman actively deceived the majority of staff at the hospital; actively deceived the patients, whom, by definition, were 'vulnerable adults' and did not consent to their involvement with the study; allowed himself to be put at risk as a researcher; and damaged the reputation of hospital staff, St. Elizabeth's, and the National Institute of Mental Health.

'[I]n the current climate, it is difficult to believe that Goffman would be given ethical approval to undertake such a project' (Cummins, 2017, p.27). However, *Asylums* remains impactful as a social science text, and it is believed that Goffman's approach to research should still be reflected on. It is the task of the next section of this feature to consider *Asylums* in light of notions of contemporary reflexive, relational and utilitarian ethical approaches. The final section will then consider Goffman's study in terms of occupational ethics, intrinsic and extrinsic values, and intrinsic virtues, drawing upon the ideas outlined in the prior section. A conclusion will then be provided that details this feature's core findings.

Goffman's approach and research ethics today

Reflexive ethics

'Reflexivity requires critical self-reflection of the ways in which researchers' social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviour impact on the research process' (Finlay and Gough, 2003, p.ix). Following this definition, it is evident that Goffman implemented a reflexive ethical approach. Whilst Goffman made it clear that the purpose of his work was to understand patients' social lives, he also took care to outline his position as a researcher and acknowledged that other 'government agencies' and 'universities' would have restricted his pursuit of 'pure research' (1971, p.9). Plus, he admitted that his views were 'partisan', and that this 'bias' was 'partially excused' because 'almost all professional literature on mental patients is written from the point of view of the psychiatrist' (1971, p.8). He additionally noted that he 'came to the hospital with no great respect for the discipline of psychiatry nor for agencies content with its current practice' (ibid.). Goffman's reflexivity allowed his readers to understand his researcher positionality. For Lahman et al. (2011, p.1403), reflexivity can enhance research by allowing for a truthful and, consequently, trustworthy account of it, which leads to what they term 'ethical knowledge creation'. Yet, 'reflexive knowledge' also gives 'the audience the opportunity to evaluate [the author]' (Hertz, 1997, p.viii). Hence, Goffman's honest reflexivity enabled critics to label him as 'guilty of "reformist bias"' (Weinstein, 1982, p.273).

Relational ethics

Even if Goffman was guilty of reformist bias, many who have adopted relational approaches to ethics did so to reform institutional practices, such as education (Baker et al., 1997), nursing (Canadian Nurses Association, 2010), and forensic psychiatry (Austin et al., 2009). 'Relational ethics is a contemporary approach to ethics that situates ethical action explicitly in relationship' (Austin, 2008, p.748). The work of those who take up the approach view ethics in terms of 'interdependency as well as our freedom, our emotions as well as our reason, and our unique situation as well as our human commonalities' (ibid.). Albeit Goffman's study does not truly reflect a relational approach, which advocates open and honest relations between researchers and participants, he does exhibit some of the approach's core principles. That is, Goffman was reflexive and aware of his situation as a researcher, he considered the emotions of the patients, and clearly focused on interdependencies. Furthermore, Goffman outlined 'a mutual and respectful exchange of information' between him and the patients, which he believed displayed their 'values, hopes and concerns' (Wallace, 2006, pp.67–68). In accordance with modern relational studies, genuine care manifests in his writing, and he evidently did want to improve the circumstances of those that institutions labelled as mentally ill. As put by Mac Suibhne (2011, p.1): '*Asylums* is, above all, a text that humanises a dehumanised group of people'.

Utilitarian ethics

The genuine care exhibited in *Asylums* is where we can locate the motivation for Goffman's deception and the other faux pas that do not conform to the strict ethical codes of today. That is, whilst he cared about the patients of St. Elizabeth's, he also cared about those in other total institutions. In consequence, the cost of the deception at St. Elizabeth's outweighed the gains that could come from the data and the reforms that it could support. Accordingly, Goffman adopted what can be viewed as a utilitarian ethical approach. 'In the utilitarian approach, decisions are [made] based on the greatest amount of benefit obtained for the greatest number of individuals' (Mandal et al., 2016, p.6). Hence, utilitarianism favours the majority at the expense of a minority (Tompkins, 2016, p.129). As such, it remains questionable whether the patients at St. Elizabeth's would have wanted to be participants, especially as Goffman admitted that some patients respected psychiatry (1971, p.08). Weinstein (1982, p.273) critiqued Goffman for this, claiming: 'Patients were motivated to come to the hospital for help with their emotional problems, and believed they got what they came for'. Nonetheless, the published analysis of these patients' lives went on to impact the lives of many. As Adlam et al. (2013, p.611) reflected, 'Goffman altered the way in which psychiatrists are seen by broader society' and, for Persaud (1993, p.726), '*Asylums*…

was a major impetus to the whole deinstitutionalisation movement', which allowed patients to have more power and personhood. It could thus be asserted that if it were not for Goffman's deception, modern systems responsible for the care of those deemed to have psychiatric issues might still rely on methods favouring institutionalisation.

Occupational ethics

Hammersley and Traianou have stated that 'research ethics' is 'a form of occupational ethics' (2012, p.36). Occupational ethics is concerned with the governance of actions of a group of people who share an occupation. Hence, Hammersley and Traianou claimed that research ethics should have a framework that is followed by all researchers. They then identified intrinsic and extrinsic values and intrinsic virtues that those undertaking research, as an occupation, should hold, in line with research ethics. For them, the core aim of researchers is 'to produce knowledge…relevant to some general human interests, to a body of disciplinary knowledge, and/or to a public policy issue' and any value that contributes directly to these aims are intrinsic (2012, p.37).

As previously mentioned, Goffman's goal, above all others, was to produce knowledge 'about the social world of the hospital inmate' (1971, p.7). For him, in accordance with Hammersley and Traianou's framework, an intrinsic virtue was 'dedication' to the production of truth concerning such knowledge (2012, p.46). Although his work was not completely 'objective', which is another virtue Hammersley and Traianou label as 'intrinsic', his truthfulness is reflected in the reflexive accounts of his writing, and he did believe his research to be 'pure' (Goffman, 1971, p.9). Albeit unclear what Goffman meant, exactly, by 'pure research', it is likely he used the term to denote that he was producing 'knowledge about social phenomena and thereby establishing principles with which to explain them' and that this knowledge was independent from the bodies that supported his research (Cargan, 2007, p.6).

'Independence' was another intrinsic virtue that helped make *Asylum*s more truthful (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012, p.49). Goffman did not concern himself with pleasing the National Institute of Mental Health, who funded his research, or those responsible for St. Elizabeth's. Granted, the hospital was allowed 'pre-publication criticism rights', but it was agreed that no representative could have 'final censorship or clearance privileges' (1971, p.8). While Goffman distanced himself from the represented institutions, he, as has been seen, adopted elements of what we would now consider to be a relational ethical approach. His pursuit for pure knowledge involved actively seeking a visceral understanding with the patients, rather than positioning himself as a bystander collecting knowledge from or on them. Again, both the elements of the relational ethical approach and independence were intrinsically valuable in helping him reach his primary goal.

Goffman's sociology is normally associated with micro-level interactions, but when observing his utilitarian approach, it is evident that he certainly considered his research on a macro-level. That is, Goffman wanted to produce a text that did not simply humanise the patients of St. Elizabeth's, but that humanised all those abiding in total institutions, and, for him to do so, he chose to deceive St. Elizabeth's patients and staff. As posited by Hammersley and Traianou, a researcher 'must be prepared to recognise and deal with potential threats to validity', and it is evident that Goffman's covert method lessened the risk of such a threat (2012, p.42). Informed consent could have been of ethical value for Goffman, but it was extrinsic, and in order for him to reach his goal, in line with the intrinsic values, a situational judgement was made, and consent became a necessary sacrifice.

Conclusion

This feature began by introducing Goffman's *Asylums* and laid out that the study's purpose was for Goffman to learn about the social world of the hospital inmate. Although the work focused on patients in a psychiatric hospital, it was outlined that it was used to understand other institutions that exert social control over those who abide in them. It was also observed that while *Asylums* was a landmark study, Goffman's covert ethnographic method did have some issues, and that due to strict contemporary ethical codes, it is unlikely that the research would be approved by an ethics committee today.

In *Goffman's approach and research ethics today*, this feature considered Goffman's research approaches in light of contemporary notions of reflexive, relational and utilitarian ethics. When considering reflexivity, it was identified that Goffman was able to critically reflect on his study, implement a contextual understanding and outline truthful reflections, which heightened knowledge integrity. However, reflexivity enables readers to evaluate the author, which caused Goffman to be accused of reformist bias. Yet, it was identified that some researchers adopt relational ethical approaches when trying to reform institutional practices, and, whilst Goffman's study is not a

true reflection of relational ethical practice because of his deceptive research methods, he did consider his unique situation and that of his participants, concerned himself with his participants' emotions, and prioritised creating a respectful exchange of knowledge. Furthermore, as with modern relational practice, genuine care is displayed in *Asylums*, and Goffman did humanise the patients. It was then suggested that the issues with his research method could be explained by utilitarian ethics. That is, deception was a necessary price to pay for increased validity, and his work was able to transform power relations in total institutions.

In the last of the sections, Hammersley and Traianou's framework concerning occupational ethics, intrinsic and extrinsic research values, and intrinsic researcher virtues, was used to discuss *Asylums*. From this, it was determined that the core researcher goal was to produce knowledge. In accordance with their judgements concerning occupational ethics for researchers, Goffman adopted the intrinsic virtues of dedication and independence, while pursuing truth and creating relevant knowledge in line with intrinsic values, although his work was not objective. It was then established that informed consent could be viewed as an extrinsic value when considering research ethics, and that, in Goffman's case, deception was necessary in order for him to produce valid knowledge and, subsequently, complete his goal as a researcher.

A lot has changed in the sixty-five years since Goffman's field work was conducted and it seems far removed from modern social science studies. Yet, this feature has outlined that Goffman's work did conform to elements of contemporary ethical approaches. Additionally, it has been observed that Goffman's aim, i.e. to produce valid knowledge, remains identical to the core aim of researchers today.

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