

# SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

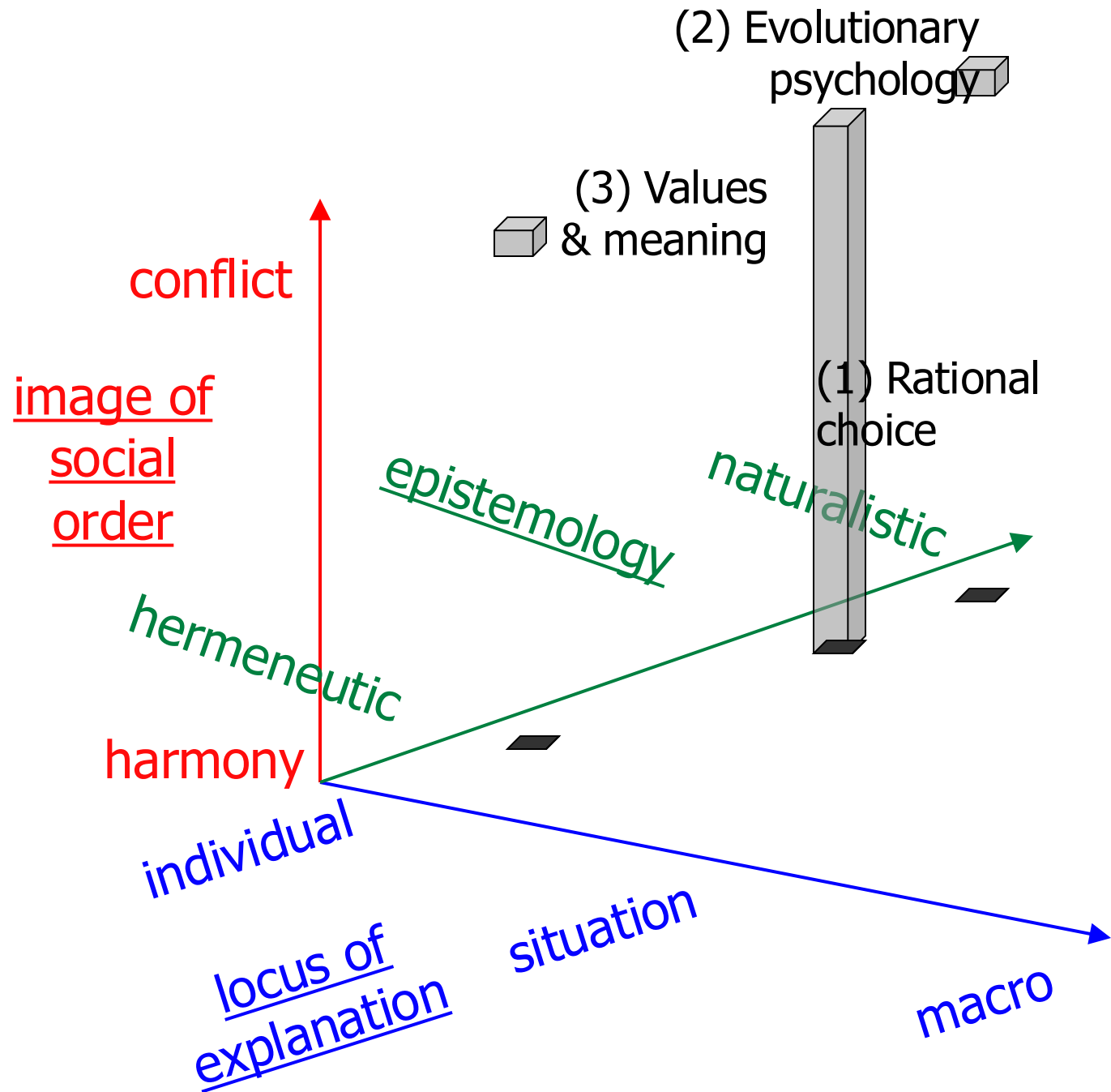
*Michaelmas 2025*

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Theoretical Perspectives

## **4. Interpersonal interaction**

`http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0060/  
SociologicalTheory.shtml`



# Introduction

Social life comprised not of individual actions but rather social situations

- even solitary individuals are recalling/rehearsing situations; virtual situations

Lecture 3: individuals act according to evaluations embedded in meaningful worldviews; explanation by value and meaning

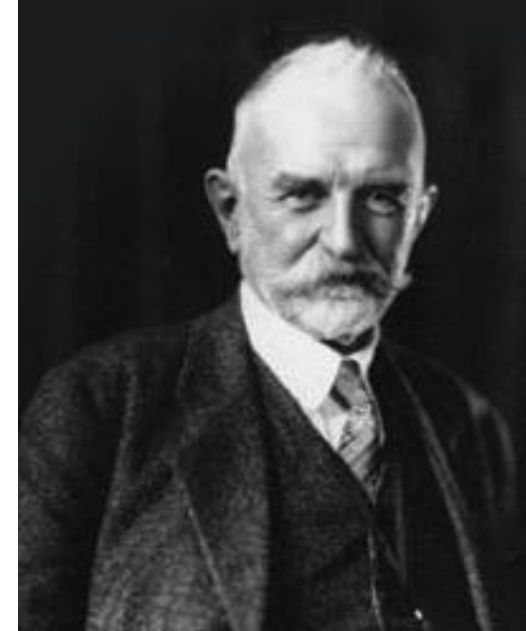
Are values/meanings really individual?

Values  $\Leftrightarrow$  social approval/esteem

‘there is no stronger means of breeding traits than through the necessity of holding one’s own in the circle of one’s associates. ... The Puritan sects put the most powerful individual interests of social self-esteem in the service of this breeding of traits.’ (Weber 1906/1920)

(approval most potent in social situations)

# Interaction => self



## G.H. Mead

- ‘The self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience’ (1934)  
‘the “me” of introspection is the same “me” that is the object of the social conduct of others’ (1913)
- ‘We are continually following up our own address to other persons by an understanding of what we are saying’ (1934)
  - thinking is internalized conversation

Symbolic interaction: emphasizes *shared* meanings; ethnographic method

- e.g. Howard Becker (1973) on marijuana



## **Goffman's interaction ritual**

- 'two or more individuals are physically in one another's presence' (1983)
- social system with life of its own
  - individual is 'the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time' (1959)
- unlike symbolic interaction: appearance not discursive meaning; deception and manipulation not consensus
- proliferation of terminology

# Focused interaction

Situation makes intricate demands on participants (taken for granted)

- Deference to situation/individuals
  - presentational rituals
  - sometimes avoidance
  - appropriate level of involvement
  - deference only overt
  - terminating an encounter may be difficult
- Demeanour—what people give off
  - differs for front v back stage
  - individual needs preparation to put on front
- Situations can be arrayed from loose (football spectators) to tight (funeral)

# Situational breakdown

Error: “in wrong face”

- face: image of self that is supported by other participants
- face-work: shaping action to be consistent with face (including helping others)

Profanation: deliberate violation of rules, disruption of performance

Persistent failure = mental illness

Ntokozi Qwabe at Rhodes Must Fall protest, 2015



# Unfocused interaction

Even 'alone' in public places, we perform ...

- civil inattention
  - glance towards, looking away
  - violations: hate stare
- waiting for someone
  - study watch, search up and down

## Example: smoking (Collins 2004)

- chemistry/biology insufficient
- smoking was a tool in interaction rituals: relaxing, carousing
- cigarettes driven by upper-class women demonstrating elegance (cigarette holders/cases, jewelry)
- men adopt cigarettes to mingle with women; tool for opening an encounter
- sharing cigarette/light as reciprocal gift exchange
- keeping your hands occupied; subordinate involvement



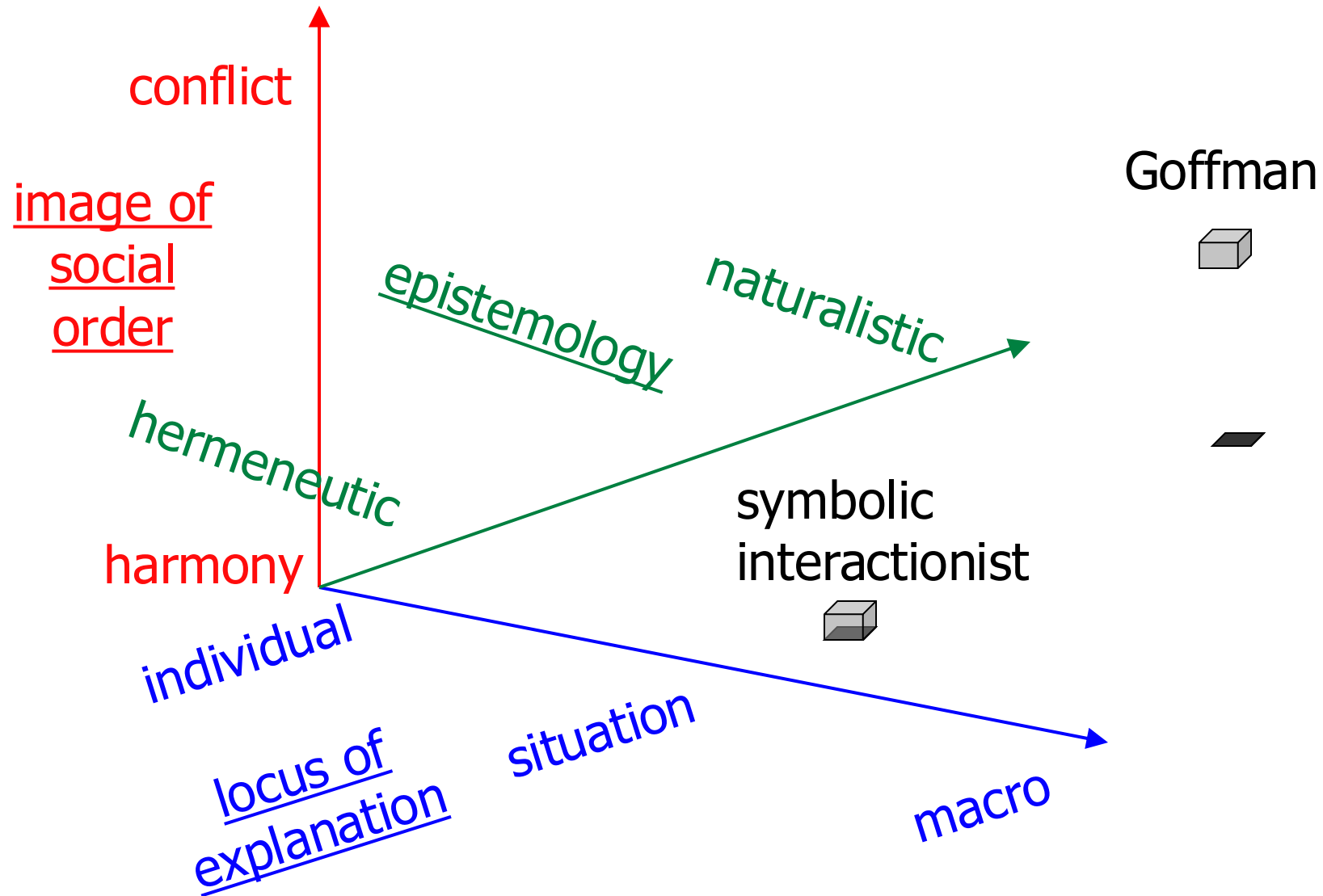
# Problems

- Individual disappears; merely a succession of masks
  - ‘Self ... is not an entity half-concealed behind events, but a changeable formula for managing oneself during them’ (1974)
  - **focus on strangers:** ‘a personal relationship can be defined as a coalition between two players to provide each other with expressions of the existence of a desirable bond’ (1974)
  - where is the motivation? (surely pride/shame?)
- No explanation of individual trajectories
  - ‘encounters in which the “impressions” subjects make during the interaction affects their life chances’ (1983)
  - Collins (2004): individual maximizes emotional energy, gained from successful situations
- No analysis of historical change/cultural variation
  - universal grammar of situations

## Virtues

- co-presence is the stuff of social life; everyday interactions (usually taken for granted) need explaining
- material as well as discursive
  - students' evaluations of lecturer (> 30 hours) predicted ( $r = .76$ ) by 30-second video clips *without* sound (Ambady & Rosenthal 1993)
- close scrutiny can surprise, e.g. Collins (2008) on violence





# QUESTIONS

- ‘Society is not an aggregate of individuals nor a macro-level structure; it is a series of face-to-face encounters.’ Discuss.
- Does the method of ethnography entail any theoretical commitments?
- Goffman treats the individual as ‘the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time’. How useful is this approach for explaining face-to-face interaction?
- What situational rules constitute the Oxford tutorial?
- How does digitally mediated interpersonal interaction differ from face-to-face copresence?
- ‘Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) failed to supplant conventional university lectures, despite providing higher quality for lower cost. This proves the importance of face-to-face copresence.’ Discuss.

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