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**The Dramaturgy of Archival Research:
A Frame Analysis of Disciplinary Reconstruction
in Sociology**

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Introduction

Research in the history of sociology has with few exceptions depended primarily on interviews, reminiscences, and information gleaned from published sources rather than upon archival data such as unpublished correspondence, manuscripts, diaries, and memos. Recently, however, Mary Jo Deegan (1988) and others have demonstrated the power of archival data for rehabilitating the history of American sociology. Archival research is not without its own set of pitfalls and problems, but archival data can at times provide needed corrections to the skewed and often self-serving historical images portrayed in many of the "standard" published accounts of our disciplinary history.

Archival research is a multifaceted methodological activity in which researchers "make sense" of collections of literally thousands of original letters, notes, manuscripts, and memorabilia. These documents are the intersubjectively verifiable trace evidence from which archival researchers reconstruct the intricacies of disciplinary history. The act of archival reconstruction is, however, a process in which few sociologists have direct experience or formal training.² To explicate the principal processual features of archival research, this paper adopts Erving Goffman's frame analytic perspective on the management and organization of experience.

Given the always present possibility of deception and our making mistakes about being deceived, Erving Goffman (1974) concluded that the structural texture of everyday life is extremely vulnerable and prone to instability. Goffman conceived this state of affairs as a research problem: i.e., how do people operate, make decisions, and anticipate the future in such a potentially unstable world? The goal of Goffman's study is discovery of the concrete ways in which people manage the ever present vulnerability of their social worlds. For the task at hand, frame analysis is turned

upon the process of archival research, i.e., how do researchers operate in archives and "make sense" of what they find?

Archival Frame Analysis

Archival researchers not only "make sense" of their data, they are frequently involved in settings where they must "make sense" of their own status and activities as researchers. Explicating this engrossed situation requires "stepping back" from archival work to bracket the archivist's presuppositions, to consciously admit the potential for fabrication and recognize the vulnerability of archivally-constructed knowledge. Historians of sociology do not make "truth claims" so much as they make "frame claims."

The activities in archives are not wholly systematic guided doings. The absorbed scholarly calm and the ordered, professional serenity of a well-appointed archival reading room (some with deep carpets, upholstered leather armchairs, and stained glass windows) can camouflage a variety of activities. These include archival muffings (e.g., misfiled, mislabeled materials), archival stunts (e.g., thefts of well-guarded material), astounding complexes (e.g.,

inclusion of "bizarre" materials in an otherwise "understandable" collection, usually marked by the archivist's announcement, "I can't imagine where this came from!"), and fortuitous discovery (e.g., finding useful materials in unlikely files). Events and materials in archives are not always what they seem. At every turn, researchers and archivists are framing or "making sense" of the situations in which they work.

Routine framing processes occur during archival research in at least five relatively distinct arenas, which I term: (1) interactional framing, (2) indexical framing, (3) frame sedimentation, (4) reconstructive framing, and (5) iterative framing. Scholarly research in archives is understood here as an interrelated set of framing activities. Archival research involves active framing on several, sometimes simultaneous, levels. The following analysis is based on more than 50 visits to a wide variety of archival repositories during the past three years as a researcher and participant observer.³

1. Interactional Framing

Upon the researcher's arrival to first use materials in an archive, there is typically an

important and usually mandatory interactional ritual: the orientation interview (Tissing 1984). During this interview, researchers explain their research projects and endeavors to gain access to materials in the archive that they believe relevant to their projects. This social interaction, like so many in this society, typically involves interactants who hold differential claims to power and status (Deegan and Hill 1987), and it is usually the archivist who wields the most power in these negotiations. The archivist controls access to unique resources and plays an indispensable role in helping the researcher locate relevant materials. Many archivists also control permission to publish or quote from materials vital to the researcher's project.

Interactionally, the archivist "makes sense" of the researcher's "presentation of self" (Goffman 1959). Is the researcher legitimate? Is she a potential thief? Will he use the documents carefully, without damaging them? Is the researcher a good natured dilettante or does she "know her business"? Is this a productive scholar who should be courted, or a stymied assistant professor who worries endlessly about writing her first book? Is he a graduate student with a powerful sponsor or an unprepared hick from a backwater

university? Should she be helped or allowed to flounder on her own? Is the researcher's end product (a proposed book, thesis, article, or presentation) worth bothering about? What is the payoff for the archive if the researcher is admitted and staff time is diverted from other patrons and other projects?

Interactionally, the astute researcher also "makes sense" of the archivist. Is the archivist likely to be helpful, indifferent, or purposefully obstructive? Is she knowledgeable? Does he adequately understand the nature and significance of the researcher's project? Is she trying to dissuade the researcher from using the materials without reasonable justification? Does the archivist appreciate the researcher's time constraints? And finally, seasoned researchers make allowance for the possibility that the archivist is attempting to put on a "good face" to smooth over inadequacies in the archivist's training or knowledge of the archival collections that the researcher needs to consult.

The archivist occupies an interactional position of considerable power, and much of this power derives from the structural attributes of archives. Because archival materials are unique and require an archivist's permission before they can be used, a

single archivist can -- with surprising ease and diffidence -- block a researcher's entire project. The researcher has little recourse when confronted by a recalcitrant archivist who obstructs access to key data. Because the researcher needs the archivist's approval, expertise, and cooperative assistance, the archivist's framing of the researcher is a crucially important dimension of the archival research process.

2. Indexical Framing

By indexical framing, I refer to the process of "making sense" of collections of archival materials that are not available for cursory or preliminary examination. Virtually all archives operate on a "closed stacks" basis, which means that researchers are not admitted to the vaults or storage areas where the archived materials physically repose. Researchers thus face a classic "black box" situation: they must request materials without benefit of prior physical inspection. This situation has parallels to the childhood pencil and paper game, "sink the submarine." Knowing and learning "what to ask for" is a major problem and it is negotiated in three interrelated ways.

First, researchers typically ask the archivist if the archive contains materials relating to their projects. This question assumes that (1) the researchers adequately frame their own projects and (2) clearly explain these frames to the archivist. It assumes also that the archivist (3) correctly frames the nature of the projects as explained by the researchers, (4) correctly frames the potential relevance of materials in the archive to the proposed projects, and (5) is appropriately knowledgeable about the full contents of the archive. All this is complicated by the fact that most archivists possess only a cursory understanding of sociology as a disciplinary and intellectual project.

Second, the archivist and/or the researcher consult the catalog index to the archive. This card file index is a principal key to the archive, and its profitable use depends on understanding that the compiler(s) of the index "made sense" of the materials in the archive in some ways rather than others. Unlike the standardized procedures typically followed for organizing and updating catalog indexes of library book collections, the catalog indexes of archival collections are riddled with idiosyncrasies that

reflect the training, interests, and habits of individual archivists. The accuracy and utility of these indexes varies widely from archive to archive. Major archives also contain large amounts of unprocessed material or "backlog" that are not indexed and cannot be identified or accessed without the personal intervention of a knowledgeable and cooperative archivist.

Third, the researcher usually has recourse to finding aids for the major collections in each archive. These written guides are sometimes very specific, carefully listing the items in a given collection by date and author, whereas other guides are comparatively superficial. Comprehensive finding guides are typically prepared only for the manuscript collections of especially well-known or institutionally significant persons or organizations. At their best, these guides help researchers locate letters and correspondence between specific individuals, but finding aids usually reveal little about the content of correspondence or other documents.

Identification within a given collection of all letters that discuss sociological topics, for example, is an enormous task requiring careful inspection of

each letter in the collection. If researchers attempt to reduce this task by looking only at correspondence exchanged between "known sociologists," they run a serious risk of overlooking key data in the letters of "unknown" or "unrecognized" sociologists (Hill 1990). A researcher's prior framing of the discipline and presuppositions concerning who "is" and who "is not" a sociologist (Deegan 1987) become stumbling blocks to enlightenment if they are not judiciously bracketed. In practice, however, few researchers have the resources or leisure to make exhaustive, comprehensive examinations of all potentially relevant archival collections and the materials they contain.

Pragmatically, archival researchers must hazard hypotheses about the adequacy and relevancy of the advice, indexes, and finding aids proffered by archivists. To the statistician, "the error of failing to reject an hypothesis when it is actually false, is referred to as a type II or Beta error (Blalock 1972: 113). Accepting an archivist's judgment that a given collection has no relevant material, when in fact it does, is the logical equivalent of a type II error. Conversely, electing to read dutifully through a collection which an archivist assures the researcher

will be helpful, but in fact is not, is also an error of the this type.

At the same time, "we also run the risk of making another kind of error, that of rejecting a true hypothesis. We refer to this kind of error as a type I or alpha error" (Blalock 1972: 114). Stubbornly searching a collection that an archivist has correctly advised to be of little use is the logical equivalent of a type I error. Conversely, skeptically disregarding an archivist's correct advice to read a collection that would in fact be very helpful is an error of the same type.

In frame terms, a double layer of frame questions appears: (1) Did the archivist and the compilers of the index and finding aids adequately frame the contents of the archive in terms useful to the researcher's project?, and (2) Did the researcher correctly frame the adequacy of the compilers' skills and the archivist's expertise? Researchers, for example, who interpret an archivist's "pleasant and helpful manner" to mean that the archivist is actually competent and knowledgeable may fail to question the archivist's advice, thus jeopardizing their research projects. This is no simple problematic in that many

researchers lack sufficient funding or time to determine whether indexes, finding aids, and archivists at the repositories they visit do in fact provide thorough and reliable guidance. It is only through repeated visits and iterative framing that reflexive researchers gain insights into these threats to their research. First, however, researchers must confront the physical residue or sediment that settles in archival files.

3. Frame Sedimentation

By frame sedimentation, I refer to the multitude of shiftings, sortings, and re-orderings through which items come to reside physically together in a given archival storage box, ready to be requested and consulted by a researcher. The cumulative aspect of sedimentation that I intend here was emphasized by Alfred Schutz (1970-1971, III: 123) when he wrote, "the actual stock of knowledge is nothing but the sedimentation of all our experiences of former definitions of previous situations" When a researcher identifies, requests, and finally opens a file folder of archival material, the particular set of items in the folder are the final result of three

successive waves of framing, of attempts by others to "make sense" of something. The situations below assume a research interest in the manuscript materials produced by sociological scholars.

Primary Framing: Over a lifetime of work, an active scholar's research, writing, and teaching generates a large amount of correspondence, manuscripts, lecture notes, and other materials. The scholar's logic-in-use for filing and arranging directly affects the internal order of her accumulating materials. Some scholars are meticulous bureaucrats who relentlessly discard "outdated" materials, others are incurable pack rats who squirrel away manuscripts and letters with haphazard abandon. Periodic urges to "clean house" can result in rearrangement for some materials and discard for others. Where one scholar may be amused by early, embryonic drafts of his papers, and keep them, another may become increasingly embarrassed by them and toss them out. In this way, scholars impose idiosyncratic orders on their material residue before their papers are ever transferred to an archival repository.

Secondary Framing: Materials generated by a scholar often come to be "made sense" of and organized by a potentially large number of intermediary framers. Materials accumulate in places not under the scholar's control, including: department, college, and university files, the files of colleagues and former students, publishing houses, journal editors' offices, and the files of professional organizations to which the scholar belongs and/or holds office. In each case, materials are arranged in various ways, are selectively saved and discarded, and are unpredictably mixed together in sometimes inexplicable sequences.

Secondary framing is particularly important at the time a decision is made to place a scholar's materials in an archive. Unless scholars pre-empt this decision to themselves and supervise the transfer to a repository or engage a competent executor, others will make it for them -- and will make their own decisions about what is "important" to save. When family members excise "embarrassing" letters, or university bureaucrats thoughtlessly toss a scholar's yellowed lecture notes, the intellectual record is seriously damaged -- and the researcher must work with the result.

Tertiary Framing: When a scholar's papers, manuscripts, books, and miscellaneous memorabilia arrive at an archival repository, they fall under the control of professional organizers who likely know little about the scholar, her filing idiosyncrasies, or the nature of her work. It is their job to "make sense" out of what can be literally thousands of letters and mountains of manuscripts. Archival habits rather than sociological sensibilities are operationalized. For example, materials are typically arranged chronologically by archivists rather than grouped by subject categories likely to interest historians of sociology.

Frame Sediment: Through the processes of primary, secondary, and tertiary framing, materials come to reside in boxes and file folders that the researcher opens to consult. These materials are "frame sediment," the residuals of many attempts over the years by several people to "make sense" of the scholar's accumulated letters, manuscripts, files, etc. The physical order in which the materials reside together in an archival folder is typically an imposed, arbitrary order that may do violence to the lived

intellectual reality of a scholar's life. The sediment encountered in an archival file folder is by no means necessarily the most important or significant material that might have been saved.

4. Reconstructive Framing

Admitted to the archive, seated before boxes of manuscripts, the researcher proceeds to "make sense" of the materials at hand for the purpose of reconstructing the history of sociology. I call this process reconstructive framing. Archival research begins with examination of a specific, essentially arbitrary document and moves forward from that point, collecting momentum, data, and organizational coherence as work continues. Historians of sociology confront a "raw batch of occurrences" when they meet archival materials face-to-file folder. Their task is to "make sense" of the materials they contain with a view to writing a sociologically-informed account of the discipline of sociology.

Having considered problems of document authenticity⁴ and the possibility of containment in archival fabrications, researchers cull archival materials for relevant dates, events, references,

accounts, memberships, opinions, and so forth, from which each researcher begins a reconstruction of sociological history. Researchers are tied simultaneously to the specific materials they examine and to their preconceptions of disciplinary history through which they frame their identification and selection of "relevant" data. Researchers with firm convictions grounded in the received ideological traditions of the discipline apply unreflexive frames to their archival data and organize them accordingly as finished products. Such researchers do not so much engage in intellectual reconstruction as in mining operations wherein materials of "known value" are dug up and processed according to predetermined specifications for manufacture.

Other dangers during initial reconstructive framing include the temptation to concretize the available frame sediment, to attribute unwarranted meanings to the order in which the materials appear in archival file folders, and to assume that an archival item is significant by virtue of its preservation alone. However, by consciously thinking of the archival record in Goffmanian terms as a "strip," or "raw batch of occurrences," researchers force

themselves to understand that the tertiary, secondary, and primary framing of the materials during frame sedimentation may be at cross purposes to their questions as sociological researchers. Noting what is not in the collection may be as important as knowing what survived. Absence of materials does not mean that they or their authors are unimportant to the history of sociology. The concrete survival of an item does not mean that it is inherently "important." Historical reconstruction ultimately involves much more than methodically excavating relevant data and setting them permanently in place like so much masonry.

5. Iterative Framing

"Making sense" of relevant sets of archival data is an iterative process in which the researcher organizes and imputes meaning to an archival strip through repeated reconsideration of previously collected materials together with the constant infusion of newly discovered data. During iterative framing, researchers re-visit archives to re-read materials and follow newly discovered leads, visiting new archives to expand their data bases. The intellectual and historical significance of archival materials shifts

throughout the process of investigation. This iterative process is the culminating phase of archival frame analysis.

Through iterative framing, the researcher moves beyond recognizing a particular letter as interesting-in-itself to frame it as part of an evolving picture of the history of sociology. The significance of a given individual fact gains or loses currency as the researcher weaves, dismantles, and re-weaves expanding networks of historical, disciplinary, and interpersonal relationships. The iterative process of "making sense" of archival data is socially grounded, and the materials of archival research are typically the products of everyday scholarly life, but archival researchers labor to interpret life-worlds in which they are not active participants.

The stranger in Alfred Schutz' (1970-1971, II: 91-105) strange land is, like the archival researcher, embedded in a series of ongoing social interactions. But, these situations present the stranger with immediate opportunities in which to test her mastery of local customs in situ, aided by authoritative residents who can correct her mistakes. Archivalists, on the

other hand, "visit" the past, collect data, and return "home" to the present to discern patterns, polish their conclusions, and publish their findings.

The social "reality check" for archival researchers occurs at "home" rather than in the place and time from which their data are radically abstracted. Archival researchers understand the past, but not as the participants experienced it in the "natural attitude" (Schutz and Luckmann 1973: 3-20). In terms of the sociological task of making rules, conventions, and organization explicit, archival researchers understand "history" very differently than did the participants whose activities they study. The iterative understanding of disciplinary history takes contextual and idiosyncratic turns, but no more so than scientific research in other fields. As B. Latour (1980: 69) astutely notes, all scientists "constantly make sense of the world and build paths leading points to one another" and only later endeavor to convince their readers "that a particular path is more straightforward than any other."

Conclusion

Archival research is not a technique that can be taught mechanistically. When seen as a set of interrelated framing processes, the complexity of archival research is revealed. Archival research that reaches beyond the validation of received truths is empowered by an understanding of these complexities, and opens the archival record to uncharted paths and challenging interpretations. It is hoped that reflection on the foregoing tour of archival framing will help researchers in their difficult quest for our disciplinary history.

The search for sociological understanding of our disciplinary heritage is a methodologically complex framing problem replete with traps, detours, and dead ends. This project requires reflexivity, openness to alternative frames, attention to multiple data sources, and peripatetic investigation in archives across the country, if not the world. Sociological framing of unique but intersubjectively verifiable data lies at the heart of research in history of sociology. Findings in this field of investigation are always tentative and subject to constant re-interpretation; it is not a project for researchers who seek unchallenged

truths. Received dogmas are fundamentally inimical to reflexive archival frame analysis in history of sociology.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented in 1989 at Howard University during the annual meeting of the Association for Humanist Sociology. An extended discussion of the points raised in this paper is found in my doctoral dissertation (Hill 1989).

2. Among sociologists, John Stanfield (1987) provides a welcome exception although his work focuses on race relations research rather than disciplinary history. The 1988 ASA Didactic Seminar on Historical Sociology convened in Atlanta, Georgia, by Larry J. Griffin and Jill Quadagno briefly reviewed archival data sources, but from the perspective of comparative macrosociology. Griffen and Quadagno left the needs of disciplinary historians untouched. Deegan's (1988) ten-year study of the origins of American sociology is the first major work in the history of sociology to make full-fledged use of numerous archival collections. For a related archival exemplar by an historian, see Marlene Shore's (1987) study of sociology at McGill University. Philip Brooks (1969) presents a useful guide to archival research from the perspective of an archivist, to which sociological users must add and answer their own questions.

3. These include university, state, and federal repositories in California, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Maryland, Michigan, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. Most recently, I was privileged to spend six weeks working "backstage" in the Preparation Section of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress. I am grateful to several researchers and archivists who have shared confidences and insights with me.

4. In an otherwise useful survey of problems in documentary research, Jennifer Platt (1981: 34-35) dismisses the question of authenticity with the observation that "sociologists . . . do not often work with primary sources which are handwritten or drawn and/or regarded as individually important by people in a position to tamper with them without immediate detection." Platt thereby signals her primary interest in matters other than the relevance of archives for research on the disciplinary history of sociology.

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