

2014

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Hill, Michael R., ““Bomb Talk” and Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*” (2014). *Sociology Department, Faculty Publications*. 313.  
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Hill, Michael R. 2014. “‘Bomb Talk’ and Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*”. This refereed study appears in *SAGE Research Methods Cases* as a part of SAGE Research Methods, an online subscription research methods tool. The umbrella website for SAGE Research Methods is: <http://srmo.sagepub.com>.

## “Bomb Talk” and Erving Goffman’s *Frame Analysis*

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### Contributor biography

Michael R. Hill holds earned doctorates in geography (1982) and sociology (1989) from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). His primary interests are theories, methodologies, and disciplinary histories. He has taught courses in geography, design studies, landscape architecture, urban planning, and sociology during appointments at Iowa State University, the University of Minnesota-Duluth, Albion College, the University of Notre Dame, and UNL. He currently edits *Sociological Origins* and is a senior tutor in the UNL Department of Athletics. Hill is the author, editor and/or co-editor of eleven books, including: *Archival Strategies and Techniques* (Sage, 1993); *Harriet Martineau: Methodological and Theoretical Perspectives* (2001); Harriet Martineau’s *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1989); and Harriet Martineau’s *An Independent Woman’s Lake District Writings* (2004). He is helping recover the central sociological works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: *With Her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland* (1997), *The Dress of Women* (2001), and *Social Ethics: Sociology and the Future of Society* (2004). He recently edited a collection of Gilman’s writings on *Marriages, Families and Children* (2011). Hill received the American Sociological Association’s Section on the History

of Sociology Distinguished Scholarly Career Award in 2003 and two Distinguished Scholarly Book Awards, in 2002 and 2005, respectively.

### **Relevant Disciplines**

anthropology, psychology, sociology

### **Academic levels**

Intermediate Undergraduate, Advanced Undergraduate, and Postgraduate.

### **Methods used**

frame analysis, observation, library research

### **Keywords**

astounding complex, daydreams, dramatic scriptings, epistemology, everyday experience, fabrications, fortuitousness, frames, guided doings, keys, knowledge-producing systems, make believe, muffings, play, stunts

### **Abstract**

Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis* is introduced (together with several of Goffman's basic concepts, including "strips", "frames", "keys", "fabrications", etc.) and applied to "bomb talk" (i.e., the different ways in which westerners discuss and/or refer to the reality of nuclear weapons). This analysis confirms (as Goffman predicts) that the

manner in which everyday life is conceptualized and subsequently transformed is extraordinarily flexible. Goffman offers a coherent knowledge-producing system, one that is best carefully studied before applying his precisely-defined concepts to other aspects of our social world. *Frame Analysis* provides the means for analyzing the organization of everyday life and answering many of the pressing questions we encounter therein, such as: “What is going on, right now?”, “When am I most vulnerable?”, “Can I know if someone is telling the truth?”. In answer, Goffman argues that we are fast asleep at precisely those moments when we think we are wide awake. Is this possible? The analysis of “bomb talk” demonstrates that we are so adept at “keying” the threat of nuclear weaponry that we appear unable to grapple effectively with its reality, i.e., that we are culturally asleep. Is this true of *everything* in our lives? This is for you to discover by conducting your own frame analyses of the phenomena that you consider most consequential and intriguing.

### **Learning outcomes**

- (1) Comprehend the pervasiveness of frames and keys in everyday life.
- (2) Match conceptual categories to appropriate empirical examples.
- (3) Trace linked sequences of keys across time.

### **Introduction**

Erving Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* can be used to understand the incredible flexibility of what I call "bomb talk"—that is, the many ways in which members of western societies talk about the reality of nuclear weapons (Hill 1988a). It bears emphasis that *Frame Analysis* explicates the way westerners in the developed world organize and understand their experiences; when I use the term "we", I refer to a western standpoint. Coming to grips with the slippery nature of "bomb talk" is but one way in which Goffman's conceptual network can be employed to examine natural events, physical objects, human activities, personal experiences, social creations, self-deceptions, etc. For example, I have used frame analysis to better understand phenomena as disparate as pedestrian accidents (Hill 1988b), the quiet calm in academic archives (Hill 1989a, b), and deception in sexual relationships (Hill 1993b). My life-partner, Mary Jo Deegan, introduced me to *Frame Analysis*, which she teaches in her courses and used to unravel the complexities of pornography (Deegan and Stein 1977) and *Star Trek* (Deegan 1984). Many others have turned to *Frame Analysis* for insight, but space precludes a comprehensive bibliographic review (something you can accomplish for yourself online). Suffice it to say that, due entirely to Goffman's perceptive genius, *Frame Analysis* has extraordinarily wide applicability.

There are three essential steps in approaching *Frame Analysis* as a knowledge-producing system. First, we must *carefully* read Goffman's work. Second, we need an operational grasp of Goffman's rudimentary concepts. Finally, we must interrogate the empirical world to discover the degree to which Goffman's ideas illuminate the nature of our everyday experiences.

### **Comprehending Goffman's *Frame Analysis* as a Knowledge-Producing System**

We must first understand what Goffman wrote about how we organize our perceptions of “what is going on” from moment to moment in everyday life. This is no simple task. Many readers find *Frame Analysis* daunting; it took me a while to fully comprehend Goffman’s mission. *Frame Analysis* is a systematic epistemological treatise about the workings of everyday knowledge. To use *Frame Analysis*, one must work through Goffman’s meticulous prose, paragraph by paragraph, definition by definition. I should note, however, that college sophomores, given time, can master the details of *Frame Analysis*. I once taught an undergraduate social problems course that required reading not only *Frame Analysis*, but also Giddens’ (1985) *The Nation-State and Mass Violence*, Luhmann’s (1989) *Ecological Communication*, and Grossberg’s (1992) *We Gotta Get Out of This Place*. At semester’s end, most students had a solid command of these books. Coincidentally, I learned that the best way to know *Frame Analysis* is to teach it. I also discovered that several scholars who should know better continue inexplicably to mangle *Frame Analysis* beyond all recognition.

It is frustrating that many academics sidestep Goffman’s definitions and his precisely stated goals. Without regard for his intellectual craftsmanship, myriad social scientists (many within the resource mobilization literature) have hijacked *Frame Analysis* and apply it simplistically in ways that Goffman would find incomprehensible. Many who claim to be doing “frame analysis” fail to grasp his meticulous analytic concepts. In providing this case study of “bomb talk,” my driving motivation is to encourage you to read *Frame Analysis* for yourself—you must make it your own—this is the only way to apprehend Goffman’s subtle complexity and wide theoretical reach.

It helps to conceptualize *Frame Analysis* as a distinctive “knowledge-producing system.” There are *many* such systems, including: positivism, structuralism, feminism, systematic empiricism, Marxism, phenomenology, humanism, general systems theory, etc. (Hill 1984). The fact that introductory sociology textbooks typically describe only three (i.e., structural-functional, interpretive, and conflict) is grossly misleading. The intellectual universe is far more diverse, open, and challenging. In system theoretic terms, each knowledge-producing system has three major elements: a meta-scientific worldview (major assumptions, values and general beliefs), methodologies (procedures for interrogating the world), and theories (organized statements about the results of methodological investigations). It is important, in order to grasp each knowledge-producing system, to understand the internal logic that holds each system together as a distinctive and identifiable whole. This results, however, in a crucial problem: the many knowledge-producing systems, while internally coherent, are almost always logically incompatible with one another. Thus, we cannot cherry-pick or combine concepts from competing, logically incompatible knowledge-producing systems without the possibility of committing serious intellectual mistakes. But, which knowledge-producing system is the *correct* one? The answer depends on what we want any given knowledge-producing system to *do*. There are many options: prediction, understanding, explanation, social control, revolution, autocracy, emancipation, democratic reform, etc. The practical task is to choose (or build) a knowledge-producing system that has a good chance of accomplishing the goal(s) you set for it, which brings us back to *Frame Analysis* and Erving Goffman.

What Goffman asked his knowledge-producing system to *do* is to provide a comprehensive answer to a deceptively simple question: What is going on *now*, at this very

moment? According to Goffman, we individually ask this question repeatedly and continuously (if not always consciously) from moment to moment. At this very instant, *your* answer is likely, “I am reading an essay”. The bulk of *Frame Analysis* systematically expands on and explicates the immediate problems, potential pitfalls, and eventual complications that confront us *every* time we answer the question “What is going on *now*”? For Goffman, our answer to the question, “what is going on *now*” is called a “frame,” hence the title of his book. Fundamentally, Goffman asked his knowledge-producing system to help us understand what is happening in the most minute intervals of our everyday lives, intervals that string together in seconds, minutes, hours, days, and lifetimes. Those who use *Frame Analysis* for some other purpose usually violate, confound, or otherwise obscure the internal logic of Goffman’s knowledge-producing system. This does not preclude asking *macro* questions, such as “Where do ‘frames’ come from?” (my answer is: from social institutions), but in asking and answering such questions we must always be mindful of Goffman’s consistent internal logic and the specific tasks he set for the knowledge-producing system he called “frame analysis”. Goffman’s *Frame Analysis* is a rigorous, comprehensive knowledge-producing system well-suited to the goal of understanding the ways that we talk about not only nuclear weapons and other forms of mass violence (Giddens 1985), but also all substantive threats (recognized and unrecognized) to our local, regional and global social ecosystems (Luhmann 1989).

### **Comprehending Goffman’s Basic Concepts**

The second task is understanding Goffman's basic concepts, several of which are summarized for quick reference in Table 1. These concepts are introduced below, together with relevant "bomb talk" illustrations. The most fundamental concept is "frame."

### **Natural Frames and Social Frames**

Goffman posited that we interpret or "make sense of" everyday events using two primary frameworks: (1) natural laws (the natural frame), such as those found in physics, chemistry, and biology which "identify occurrences seen as undirected, unoriented, unanimated, unguided, 'purely physical'" and (2) guided doings (or the social frame) which "incorporate the will, aim, and controlling effect of a live agency," usually understood as human (Goffman 1974: 22). Thus, consider a nuclear detonation in its purely physical aspects. This event can be "made sense of" by referring to the laws of physics. The origin of the energy released by nuclear devices is contained in Einstein's famous equation,  $E = mc^2$ , where  $m$  is mass,  $c$  is the speed of light, and  $E$  is the energy produced. Consider now the intentional dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. The latter is a terrifying example of a willful "guided doing."

### **Bridge Explanations**

Not all events fit neatly within the natural and social frames, however. Willful plans sometimes go awry. And, sometimes, plans with little objective chance of success nonetheless prevail. Goffman understood the potential for both failure and exceptional performance. In terms

**Figure 1. Table of Basic Terminology**

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Brief Definition</b>
Strip	Undifferentiated, on-going activity that is not yet framed.
Frame	An answer to the question: What is going on <i>right now, at this instant?</i>
Natural Frame	Making sense of a strip by appeal to the laws of nature, such as physics.
Social Frame	Making sense of a strip as an intentional, guided doing controlled by a living agent and presupposing the necessary co-existence of the natural frame.
Bridge Explanation	Standard formulas, such as “muffing,” used to “make sense of” events that do not fit easily into the two primary (i.e., social and/or natural) frameworks.
Muffing	Loss of control by a living agent where control is normally expected.
Stunt	Exhibition of extraordinary control by a living agent where such control is not expected.
Key	An identifiable set of conventions by which a strip already framed or “made sense of” in terms of social and/or natural frameworks is <i>transformed</i> into something patterned on the original activity but is now understood to be something distinctly different.
Re-key	To further key anew a strip that has been previously framed and keyed.

Fabrication	A special kind of key in which one or more participants in an on-going situation is/are purposefully duped or “kept in the dark” as to what is “really” going on.
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of “bomb talk,” first suppose that the crew of the Enola Gay had got their bearings wrong, made a mistake, and detonated an atomic bomb over Honolulu instead of Hiroshima. Alternatively, suppose that the Enola Gay survived hurricane winds and massive anti-aircraft defenses sufficient to guarantee an aborted mission and yet somehow the crew managed to drop a bomb on the intended target. In situations like the first case, Goffman referred to “muffings” and in the second he referred to “stunts.” A “muffing” occurs when the control normally expected in a guided doing is absent or is temporarily lost. In stark contrast, a “stunt” displays remarkable control where none is expected and involves “The maintenance of guidance and control by some willed agency under what are seen as nearly impossible conditions” (Goffman 1974: 30).

On the other hand, it may sometimes appear—at first glance—that something really *is* impossible, i.e., when we encounter a strip of events that we cannot immediately account for in terms of natural laws, guided doings, muffings, *or* stunts. Goffman called such a situation an “astounding complex.” In practice, he noted, we approach an astounding complex with a sort of intellectual holding action. That is, we “expect that a ‘simple’ or ‘natural’ explanation will soon be discovered” (Goffman 1974: 28). Unexplained (i.e., unframed) events can also be accounted for (or framed) as “fortuitous,” as when a competently performing person:

Meets with the natural workings of the world in a way he could not be expected to anticipate, with consequential results. Or two or more unconnected and mutually unoriented individuals, each properly guiding his own doings, jointly bring about an unanticipated event that is significant. (Goffman 1974: 33)

Thus, as a simple matter of fortuitousness, many citizens of Hiroshima found themselves “out of town” on business or other errands on August 6, 1945, while Japanese from other cities made trips to the doomed city with no thought to what the day would bring. The film, *Hiroshima—Mon amour*, invoked precisely this appeal to fortuitous timing in a conversation between two lovers, one of whom lived in Hiroshima and recounts how he escaped the bombing just by “luck.” Survivors’ accounts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki tell of persons who walked away from infernos and collapsing buildings without a scratch while friends standing next to them were instantly incinerated. We explain such events as happenstance, fortuitous, “as luck would have it,” but—and this is the important part—without recourse to any forces or powers beyond natural law and/or guided doings.

Taken together, “bridge explanations” are formulas we use to “make sense of” events that do not fit easily into the two primary frameworks. They help us maintain the epistemological foundations of our everyday world such that no event is ever left without a culturally acceptable explanation. This means that whenever we ask, “what is going on here?” we *always* have a reasonable and ready answer.

This means that weaponry is *not* accorded extra-epistemological status outside Goffman’s two primary frameworks. We “make sense of” nuclear warfare in western culture *in the same way that we make sense of everything we encounter in everyday life*, from cornflakes to circus clowns to murder and mischief. Further, my study documented that we also *transform* such events using identical epistemological mechanisms, as discussed below.

## **Transformations: Keys and Fabrications**

The epistemologically-secured mundane world of everyday experience, described above, can be easily transformed. It is remarkably flexible, slippery, and vulnerable. With little effort, we can take events that we have “made sense of” in terms of primary frames and bridge explanations and quickly *transform* them into something quite else. According to Goffman, *keys* are identifiable sets of conventions or rules by which an activity already “made sense of” in terms of the two primary frameworks is transformed into something patterned on this activity but that is clearly understood by all concerned to be something quite different. For example, suppose we observe an atmospheric detonation of a nuclear weapon. We interpret this event initially in terms of guided doings and the laws of physics. Now, however, suppose we watch an episode of the 2007 television show *Jericho* in which fictional nuclear weapons are “detonated” in Kansas, and the resulting social disruption is offered as scripted *entertainment*. The make-believe images on the television screen are a “key” based on the potential reality of actual nuclear detonations. The images on *Jericho* were produced according to sets of “special-effects” conventions that we accept as television viewers. In the same way, we discriminate between a “real” fight and persons who are only “playing” at fighting. Play is a *key*, a set of rules, by which any serious activity can be transformed into something *less serious*, perhaps something funny or enjoyable.

Goffman identified several general keys commonly found in western cultures, including: make believe, contests, ceremonies, and technical redosings. Not all transformations are straightforward keys, however. *Fabrications* are transformations in which persons are deliberately deceived about the actual seriousness of events in which they are engaged. Government propaganda often falls into the category of “fabrication.” Space precludes giving

detailed attention to fabrications here, but they are relevant to a comprehensive characterization of “bomb talk.” For example, the ever present potential for fabrication is at the heart of attempts to establish verification rules by which one nuclear power can monitor the nuclear capabilities of another without being duped as to the real state of affairs. *Frame Analysis* implies that such rules are always doomed to failure.

You now have enough concepts in hand to appreciate the expansive logical power of Goffman’s epistemological system. The following set of axioms and theorems, for example, provide the makings of a useful generator of testable hypotheses:

1. Any undifferentiated strip of activity can be framed.
2. Anything that can be framed can be keyed.
3. Anything that can be framed can be fabricated.
4. No one can ever be certain that he or she is not contained in a fabrication.
5. Anything that can be keyed can be re-keyed.
6. Anything that can be keyed can be fabricated.
7. Anything that can be fabricated can be keyed. And so on.

To this logical net Goffman added such ideas as “frame breaks,” “negative experience,” and the “vulnerability” of experience, and thereby *Frame Analysis* becomes a work of extraordinary scope and general applicability.

## The Empirical Search for Keys

Thus, having adopted *Frame Analysis* as the anchor for my study of “bomb talk,” I took it as an empirical challenge to demonstrate that the lethal reality of nuclear weapons had, in fact, been keyed into every conceivable key that one could think of. Or, stated hypothetically: *there exists no key into which “bomb talk” has not been transformed*. My task was then to show that each of the keys Goffman identified (as well as many he did not) were/are used in western culture to transform the reality of nuclear weapons into something different, something fictional, something playful, something more comforting, something “normal,” something less lethal, and thus something more easily forgotten.

The data collected comprise documented instances of *keyings* of the historical and continuing reality of nuclear weapons (thus, the data were sometimes contemporary and sometimes contemporaneous). First, I found relevant examples of all keys specifically identified in *Frame Analysis*. Second, I supplemented those exemplars by being alert to additional keys beyond those mentioned by Goffman, such as business names (e.g., Atomic Cleaners), symposia, paintings, and symphonies, etc. In the first strategy, I was guided by the categories of keys mentioned in *Frame Analysis*, per se. The second strategy involved extending *Frame Analysis* to identify additional keys and variations thereon, and then looking for and becoming alert to bomb-talk-laden examples.

The process of locating concrete keyed examples involved several primary and secondary qualitative techniques (Hill 2006), including: library and archival research (Hill 1992a), brainstorming with friends and classmates, attentive listening to on-going conversations in public places, and talking to knowledgeable informants. I found many examples via library

research using standard periodical and topical indexes. For example, after deciding that *poetry* could be a type of *key*, I consulted a reference librarian and we looked in *The Poetry Index* under “atomic bomb.” I was rewarded with several examples of “nuclear” poems. Today, I would also conduct online Boolean keyword searches at internet sites like Google, searching, for example, for “atom bomb” AND “poetry”; “nuclear detonation” AND “maps”; “weapons of mass destruction” AND “paintings,” etc. And, do you see that such a search is *a new type of key* (as are texts and tweets)?

I discovered many examples of nuclear-themed keys by giving heightened attention to my everyday environment, especially to popular media. I was alert to stories, ads, events, songs, and announcements in which the words “nuclear” or “atomic” appeared. Most of these discoveries were *serendipitous*. For example, I discovered a chilling key while visiting a toy store where a children’s “atomic warfare” board game was on display. More recently, I found a set of training films for Civil Defense wardens, preparing them for their post-atomic attack duties, while browsing at an antique mall. I try to follow the advice of Harriet Martineau, sociology’s first methodologist, who emphasized that it is important to notice “the records of any society, be they what they may, whether architectural remains, epitaphs, civic registers, national music, or any other of the thousand manifestations of the common mind which may be found among every people . . .” (1838: 74). As social scientists, we should all be alert to the social patterns embedded everywhere around us. Using Goffman’s categories, here are several keyed examples that I discovered:

### **Make Believe**

By “make-believe” Goffman referred to the imitation or running through of the activity that is keyed “with the knowledge that nothing practical will come of the doing” (1974: 48).

Subcategories include play, daydreams, and dramatic scriptings.

8. *Play*. By “play,” Goffman referred to “relatively brief intrusions of unserious mimicry” (1974: 48). Consider this example of atomic play gone wrong: “Four children were injured yesterday afternoon when chemicals with which they were playing at making atom bombs exploded [in a Brooklyn apartment]” (*New York Times*, December 3, 1945: 12).

9. *Daydreams and nightmares*. The extent to which people daydream about nuclear war is unknown, but psychologists remind us that a significant number of youngsters do at least “think about” the possibility of nuclear war. From my own experience as a nuclear weapons guard in the U.S. Air Force, I can relate that I found myself more than once constructing mental “What if .....?” scenarios involving an atomic missile launch. Many people report that while asleep they have nightmares about nuclear attacks (Goffman, however, analyzed dreams as fabrications rather than keys).

The cerebral musings that writers leave behind in their diaries can sometimes be conceptualized as the re-keying of prior daydreams. For example, Thomas Merton entered the following in his diary at the time of the Cuban missile crisis:

I am only just beginning to realize that we were very close indeed to nuclear war; never so close! The very undignified way Krushchev backed down makes this very clear indeed. The bombers were all

ready to go, and he had no doubts on that score. Thank God it is over. (1966: 249)

10. *Dramatic Scriptings*. Merton's reflection introduces the notion of written *scripts* intended to unfold publicly as a story. Goffman included here the productions offered "to the public through the media of television, radio, newspapers, magazines, books, theater" (1974: 53). He viewed dramatic scriptings as especially significant because ". . . they provide a mock-up of everyday life, a put together script of unscripted social doings, and thus are a source of broad hints concerning the structure of [unscripted guided doings]." Specific sub-categories include novels, theater, movies, television dramas, poems, popular music, proper names, slogans, and jokes, and in *every category* it was a simple matter to find numerous examples in which nuclear warfare was keyed. My favorites include: Jeff Sutton's novel *H-Bomb over America*; the PBS drama, *Home*, which explored the moral dilemma faced by two officers who received an order to launch their Minuteman missiles; and *The Mouse That Roared*, a movie in which the fictitious Grand Duchy of Fenwick succeeds in stealing a U.S. doomsday bomb).

## **Contests**

A real nuclear contest would be catastrophic, but a non-lethal transformation is the children's board game, *Nuclear War*, complete with rules for "winning" and "losing."

## **Ceremonials**

Keyed nuclear ceremonies take various forms. Ritual dramas of many types are unexpectedly embedded in—and structure—our everyday lives (Deegan 1989, 1998). The once thrice daily loading of Top Secret nuclear SIOP instructions on board the Strategic Air Command's continuously airborne secondary command post had distinctive ritual traits grounded in centuries of military pomp and circumstance. Other ceremonies are commemorative. In the 1985, those who designed the first atomic bomb arranged an official reunion, complete with all the ritual reminiscing that typifies such events (*New York Times*, June 17, 1985: 12). Formal religious services were performed on the exact site of the first atomic explosion (the “Trinity Test”) complete with an altar “bearing earth from Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (*New York Times*, July 17, 1985: 14). Particularly somber examples of ceremonies are the annual reunions, peace marches, and vigils of the Hibakusha, or “survivors,” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

## **Technical Redoings**

Technical redoings involve performing an activity out of its usual context with the understanding that the original outcome of the activity will not occur, yet unlike play the redoing is for a utilitarian purpose. Sub-categories include: practicing, simulations, rehearsals, planning, and demonstrations. Again, nuclear-themed examples of these keys are readily documented. A central feature of nuclear war games is that these practice runs can mimic but never achieve “real” conditions. As Goffman (1974: 65) put it, “This

dilemma is seen most clearly perhaps in war games, where participants must take seriously that which can ultimately be made serious only by what can't be employed: 'live' ammunition lethally directed." *Demonstrations* or tests of actual nuclear devices have a long and continuing history. A nuclear test is a redoing because although a real nuclear weapon is detonated; it is not intended to have lethal consequences.

Improvements in photographic and electronic technologies have vastly increased our capacity to document and then *replay* or review our actions on film and video. The *documentary* format includes news reports, microfilm, histories, photo essays, illustrations, news film archives, interviews, documentary films (Frederick Wiseman's *Missile* is an exceptionally fine example), and so on. The ritual marches of the Hibakusha were re-keyed in the PBS special, *Remembering the Bomb*. I recently received a catalog of photographs depicting "The First Nuclear War" for use in classroom teaching. *Exhibits* in museums in Japan and the United States (e.g., the National Museum of Nuclear Science & History, in New Mexico) enshrine the history of the nuclear age.

### **Summary**

A universe of recognizable patterns and formats (some of which are neither narrative nor discursive in character, such as nonverbal activity, the visual and plastic arts, and much of the accumulating physical traces of on-going human life, as found in junk stores—to wit: The Black Hole, a junk store in Los Alamos, New Mexico, dealing in the flotsam from nearby nuclear laboratories) have been socially devised in which our

nuclear reality has been keyed. These include: ads, agencies, analyses, autobiographies, bibliographies, biographies, briefings, bureaucracies, catalogs, censuses, centers, college courses, comic books, commissions, committees, debates, declarations, dialogues, documentaries, exercises, expert testimony, exposés, glossaries, graffiti, hearings, histories, interviews, inventories, investigations, lectures, leaflets, letters, lobbies, maps, marches, memoirs, memos, mimes, monologues, names, news reports, novels, paintings, papal encyclicals, parables, parodies, photographs, plans, poems, posters, prayers, protests, questionnaires, referendums, satire, scrapbooks, sculptures, sermons, sit-ins, surveys, symposia, songs, speeches, symphonies, teach-ins, treaties, trials, and, yes, essays such as this one. The fundamental point is that empirically I could find (then or now) no known key from which nuclear examples are absent.

## **Conclusion**

This empirically-documented, nuclear-infused inventory of Goffmanesque keys had a purpose: to document the extreme flexibility and easy transformations permitted by the rules and conventions we use to organize and give meaning to events in our everyday lives. These rules allow us to key at will, to make jokes, movies, novels, experiments, paintings, slogans, museum displays, and so on, based upon keying the most deadly peril our world has ever faced. This extraordinary flexibility, I conclude, is itself a threat. We act on our nuclear reality in exactly the same way that we respond to other “social problems,” by writing letters to congresspersons, organizing talk shows and fund raisers,

sponsoring television ads and newsletters, staging marches, demonstrations, and teach-ins. Such activities are not without inherent social merit, but they often lead us away from what really needs doing. To wit: a hostess on a recent talk show interviewed the organizer of a nuclear freeze protest march. The organizer, when pressed about the effectiveness of the proposed march, replied that even if it did not help stop nuclear proliferation, *the march itself would be fun*.

Shakespeare notwithstanding, Goffman (1974: 1) observed that “All the world is *not* a stage” (emphasis added), but many of us act as if it is. Unfortunately, all the while our words flow and flower in key after key, the probability of another catastrophic nuclear detonation moves ever closer to an eventual certainty (c.f., Mills 1958). Goffman (1974: 14) wrote:

The analysis developed [in *Frame Analysis*] does not catch at the differences between the advantaged and disadvantaged classes and can be said to direct attention away from such matters. I think that is true. I can only suggest that he who would combat false consciousness and awaken people to their true interests has much to do, because the sleep is very deep. And I do not intend here to provide a lullaby but merely to sneak in and watch the way people snore.

Politically, according to Goffman, we are fast asleep at precisely those moments that we think we are wide awake. We too often convince ourselves that we are *doing* something about “X” when, in fact, we are doing nothing more than *keying* “X”. Existentially, we are like skilled pugilists who cannot box our way out of wet paper bags. The logic of *Frame Analysis* makes it

axiomatic that “bomb talk” is frameable and keyable *ad infinitum* such that we never fully “wake up” to the realities on which we need to focus. Likewise, systematic empirical research demonstrates that our nuclear predicament is keyed endlessly into frames that are non-serious, non-threatening, and normalizing—allowing us to “live” with nuclear weaponry when, in all probability, we should not.

### **Exercises and Discussion Questions**

11. What is a “frame”? What is a “key”? Give an example of something that has been “made sense of” using a “natural frame” and then keyed into something else. Do the same for something that has been made sense of using a “social frame”.
12. What is it that makes a given “key” (a drama, for example) different from any other “key” (poetry, oil painting, or rumor, for example)?
13. Identify an empirical event that has been keyed as a “news story,” then keyed as an “editorial,” and then keyed as “a letter to the editor.”
14. Identify an empirical event that has been keyed as “a novel,” then keyed as “a screen play,” then keyed as “a motion picture,” and lastly keyed as “a movie review.”
15. Choose a topic that interests you. Then, demonstrate with imaginative examples how that topic can be keyed as a “dramatic scripting,” a “contest,” a

“ceremonial,” and a “technical redoing.”

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