Both Ever and Never Together: Toward a Sociology Fit to the Human Condition

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In this beautifully produced little book, Ira Cohen takes a “voyage of sociological discovery” by focusing on what he calls solitary action. His definitional statements vary in emphasis but most readers will sense a contrast to what is usually glossed as “face-to-face” interaction. It does not take long to make a convincing case that much of everyday life offers plenty of material for an analysis of solitary action. Cohen references Eric Klinenberg’s recent book on people living “solo,” the topic resonates well with studies of home-based work, and Cohen gives many and diverse examples, including activities like reading, writing, walking, and driving, whether done for work, exercise, or pleasure.

Cohen first proposes “elements” of solitary action, which he sees as a partial answer to the question, what is social action? From examinations of playing solitaire and jazz improvisation, he finds that solitary action requires “certain cognitive skills” that set up “contextual reflexivity,” that it has “hypnotic” or “structuration” effects, often through setting up rhythmic behavior, and that it happens when a person is not being monitored immediately by another or is executing a behavioral sequence with no input or interference from another. Then he analyzes what he presents as mutually exclusive forms of solitary activity (see the fourfold table at p. 102), which include “peripatetic” action, like web surfing; regimens, such as novices’ musical practice; and engrossments, like solving puzzles and playing casino slots. He often compares his concepts with those others have used and gives examples from literature (Proust’s description of how memory works), draws on his own experiences (taking nature walks), and hinges extensive analysis on descriptions of activities that are presumptive in that they are subjected to no time/space/person-specific reference.

It is risky to base analysis on descriptions without supplying field notes or references to writings in which others have recorded their time/space-specified observations. Thus, his characterization of playing slots as engrossing does not fit with my observations in Reno, where elderly patrons often exhibit wandering focus and palpable boredom, slumping before one-armed bandits that they pull, seemingly as extensions of the machines, for hours. If the sociologist appreciates the trip that organizes their day, many aged casino players will appear not so much engrossed as indifferently following a regimen until the bus that brought them will leave to bring them back to their Sacramento-area homes. Cohen presumably
would dismiss such objections, as they simply require shifting the characterization of given moments into one or another of his theorized categories, which remain, analytically, mutually exclusive.

Cohen gives a separate chapter to "reflexives," the fourth form of solitary actions, which are distinguished by high involvement in loosely structured situations. His examples include sportswriting (for him, a comment reportedly made by Red Smith is enough to launch extensive reflections), plumbers innovating solutions on construction sites (no specific example given), jazz improvisation (drawing on David Sudnow's *Ways of the Hand*), and contextual indexicality in conversations (no transcripts analyzed to support the claim that people may move from talking about ballet to boxing "with nothing more than an elective affinity"); and he looks to autobiographical writings by prisoners to understand how people in solitary confinement can remain engaged.

Those who would take up the study of solitary action will soon run into challenges not signaled in this book. "Solitary action and social interaction are, by definition, mutually exclusive phenomena" (p. 11). An author is free to create definitions but readers will apply tests of empirical application. It remains to be shown that a binary analysis of some parts of everyday life as "in interaction" and others as "solitary action" can work empirically, that is, in precise and replete description. Problems with Cohen's conceptual apparatus are indicated by the writings of those he cites as his predecessors and by his failure to represent works that do not fit his representation of the literature.

As Cohen reads Goffman and Garfinkel, they focused on "social interaction" in a face-to-face or immediate co-responsive context. He is mystified as to why (p. 38). The reason is that, for both, face-to-face interaction was a strategic focus. Both were obsessed with demonstrating that when most intimately in contact with another—even there—social life is inexorably shaped by each actor's awareness that he or she is alone. (Some homework: after obtaining the requisite approval from your IRB, try to sustain mutual gaze when coming with a lover.)

For Garfinkel, who closely followed Alfred Schütz historically and intellectually, the initial challenge was to understand how people maintain a taken-for-granted assumption of "intersubjectivity," that is, that one's action is ongoingly understood by the other from one's own standpoint. Garfinkel studied face-to-face interaction as more propitious for initially uncovering ethno-methods than time-and-space distant interaction, that is, for getting evidence on how people collaboratively sustain the shared presumption that they are "with" another in the minimal sense of acting off of a common base, rather than living their lives in isolation and acknowledging, to other and to self, that they are acting in solitary worlds of experience. In my triple capacity as a twenty-year colleague of Garfinkel's, as one of the universe of readers who had to labor long to get confidently connected to the meaning of his writings, and as a part-time paranoid, it became clear that his focus on intersubjectivity as an accomplishment was at once a generalizable discovery and deeply reflexive. The problematic of intersubjectivity does not disappear when one is alone, but it can be especially crazy-making to try to study it without objectified evidence, for example a transcript, to show how people help each other treat each other as if they understand each other.

Similarly, if somewhat less neurotically, at the essence of Goffman's creativity was a sensitivity to the essentially solitary self-awareness behind social life, which allowed him to detail infinitely how soulless, undetermined, structurally independent actors dramatize a version of self to shape others' views of and responses to themselves. For Garfinkel, the fundamental question was, how is it that people do not realize that they are always engaged in solitary action? For Goffman, how do people maneuver through social life on the understanding that, like themselves, everyone else they encounter is not only hidden behind a presented front but also understands that everyone else is, too?

For both, social interaction and solitary action are not in an either/or relationship: people construct social interaction through a vivid understanding that being with another is always problematic, that at most we can collaborate in sustaining each other's operating presumption that we are acting from the same cultural grounds, understanding each other from each other's perspective, living...
life together either in faith or mutual deception. Perhaps some people only rarely experience breaches in the presumption, but Goffman and Garfinkel were aware that the problem is existential. Studying how intersubjectivity, or at least its presumption, is collaboratively sustained, or studying the devices with and forms in which individuals produce a version of self that carries them into and through social life, then becomes the fundamental work of sociology.

What about the other side of the contrast? What happens when one acts seemingly alone, outside of co-presence with any other, in confidence that no one is monitoring, assessing, or potentially intervening in one’s action? With the possible exceptions of periods when one has specifically moved out of social interaction to sleep, meditate, become euphoric via chemicals, been taken into an aesthetic reverie (à la Bachelard)—Schütz made a non-exhaustive list that he contrasted with the obdurate moments of social life—an individual is often, perhaps always interacting with others over time and space distances.

Herbert Blumer, who is not cited in this book, said as much, repeatedly and emphatically. Howard S. Becker in his work on art, Donald Roy in his research on the factory floor, and Marjorie DeVault on mothers’ solitary work of feeding the family made it a point to show how what may seem to be solitary action is constructed through taking into account, at Time 1, how others will respond at Time 2. When composing music, working on an assembly line, or preparing food, people may be alone in the sense of executing sequences of behavior independent of others’ interventions or monitoring, but they are shaping their behavior in anticipation of how others will pick it up: writing music for instruments that musicians know how to play; restricting output so that managers do not adjust the piece-work rate down; preparing food in such ways that the children will relish eating it.

In addition to analyzing interaction over distances of time and space, those who would extend Cohen’s contribution will find it necessary to distinguish between symmetrical and asymmetrical interaction, as Goffman often did (see, e.g., his essay on strategic interaction). People are engaged asymmetrically in social interaction when they act through anticipating others’ responses, even without an expectation that others will see and respond to their action, presently or in the future. When reading a newspaper at Time 1, one imagines the sharp remark that would lead to the public destruction of an enemy (e.g., what you would say in a televised debate with Donald Trump), knowing that Time 2 will never materialize. When, at Time 2, person B reads a novel written at Time 1 by person A, B feels threat and joy through inhabiting the social interactions lived in Time Eternal by characters that have become avatars. A, when writing, interacts asymmetrically with anticipated readers; B, when reading, interacts asymmetrically with A through responding to the antagonists A has created. (Or, put alternatively, through a time delay and through the object-mediation of the text, B completes the trajectory toward interaction symmetry that A had hopefully projected.) Each, in Blumer’s clear, loud, but now too-silent language, takes into account the responses of another in forming his/her own behavior, whether that be the seemingly solitary action of writing or that of reading, which is indeed behavior, as reading is conducted with varying forms and degrees of attention, emotion, opinionated reaction, and so forth.

If we pursue the study of social interaction with a handful of distinctions—face-to-face or mutually monitored behavior versus interactions through which people attend to each other over time and space through the mediation of objects; asymmetrical versus symmetrical interaction; and, with a nod to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss on awareness contexts, acknowledged versus unacknowledged interaction—we will be led to study solitary action within an overarching understanding of social life as a dualism of dialectics, à la Simmel. We will soon appreciate, on the one hand, the constant, subtle, usually tacit work people collaboratively do to deny, mask, or transcend solitude even in the moments when social interaction is mutually monitored with open awareness in real time. In dualistic fashion, we will also appreciate the dialectic of social interaction that is at the foundations of even the most solitary action, including the playing of solitaire, which is, after all, a construction...
of concatenating plays of cards according to the mathematical possibilities as set up some time ago by someone or some community of game creators whose logic one is progressively discovering, and to whom one is relating, however anonymously and unreflectively. The liveliness of social life drops out of a schema that sees solitary action and social interaction as mutually exclusive. The dynamic we all constantly live arises in the dialectics of one or the other of two complementary dualities.

Much of the endless inspiration that is part of sociology’s distinctive genius arises from seeing the social interaction that is hidden behind the blinders of everyday life as lived naively, whether the blinders are built by the hubris of the “self-made” businessman or through a more innocent indifference to history. Children in some preschools learn that they can’t build a pink tower with blocks of varying volume unless they mount them in serially descending order. As they work, they experience what their progressive excitement anticipates finding, the exigencies built seemingly naturally into the structure of the world. The world seems magical, charmed with inherent ordering power. If they never realize that Maria Montessori put the self-correcting logic into the materials 100 years ago, no matter to the pedagogical value of the activity. But sociologists should be equipped to appreciate the complement of asymmetrical and object-mediated interactions that are realized in such moments.

The method of Solitary Action is a commentary on examples chosen peripatetically by the author. In order to appreciate fully the opening Cohen’s book offers, it will be necessary to get down to the prosaic business of identifying data sets and working through them systematically. One might, for example, record (with AV equipment and field notes developed by using Margarethe Kusenbach’s “go along” methodology) an individual from waking up to sleeping, then analyze the challenges necessary to describe each phase as he or she lives through solitary behavior (perhaps revised as “asymmetrical” interaction) or behavior with others (perhaps revised as “symmetrical” and “mutually aware” interaction), then (Please!) make the data set available to others. The results should be a vast expansion on Cohen’s welcome contribution to recognizing an indispensable part of sociological work, that of specifying social ontology.