

Abstract

The article discusses how ethnography can contribute towards the development of sociological theory. It uses a case study of one theoretical idea refined through ethnographic fieldwork – Phil Strong's (1979; 1988) work on Erving Goffman's theory of ceremony. The article argues that (1) Strong was able to subject Goffman's ideas to empirical testing and (2) was successful in further developing Goffman's ideas on ceremony. In doing so, he (3) demonstrated that ethnography can be more productive in developing theoretical ideas, but this relied upon Strong's personal enthusiasm for theory and fieldwork. His theoretical empiricism provides an exemplar of the way theory and conceptual refinement can grow as a result of doing ethnography the right way..

We should [...] study the typifications available to actors and the rules, often unstated, that govern their application. Where these have become relatively institutionalised – as in particular schools, hospitals, etc. one can then attempt to work back to the subjective meaning for actors of a particular form of behaviour. Sociology obviously does not stop here – rather it provides us with a firm base from which *we can then go on to ask the more interesting questions perhaps of the origins of the typifications who has the power to define and apply them what are their functions for the groups who use them?* Etc. (Strong 1969:3, emphasis added).

What this paper offers is, I hope, an empirical way forward with one bunch of his ideas (Strong 1988:230).

Introduction

A quarter of a century has passed since Goffman¹ observed the apathy that greeted his own attempts to establish the interaction order as a legitimate field of sociological investigation (Goffman 1983). In 1988, Strong similarly noted “the peculiar reluctance by many sociologists to concede any importance to the micro sphere” (Strong 1988:229) and twenty-first century sociologists have also continued to express disappointment with the obscure status of interactionism within the sociological canon (Atkinson and Housley 2003; Maines 2001; Dingwall 2001b;

¹ Admittedly, there are substantive question marks over whether Goffman can be considered to be a symbolic interactionist, as some introductory textbooks label him (cf. Giddens 1988). Goffman himself was resistant to this; in interview (Verhoeven 1993); in lectures in fieldwork (Goffman [Lofland] 1989); in his summary of his own career (Goffman 1983); in response to others' critiques (Goffman 1981) and in personal communications (Strong 1983). These were the rare instances where reflections were ferreted out of him. His work is hence best categorized as exploring what he termed as ‘the interaction order’ (Goffman 1983).

Manning 2005). Such marginality seems all the more surprising given the explosion in qualitative methods and ethnographic approaches associated with an interactionist tradition.² Implicit here, therefore, is the suggestion that there has been a *lack* of engagement with theoretical ideas by qualitative, ethnographic researchers – or at least that the former has failed to match the latter's success. Of course, theory is only one outcome of such research and the article is not seeking to suggest that alternative goals or outcomes are less desirable or valuable. Rather, the emphasis is upon the *positive* role ethnographic research can fulfill for theory and that therefore this should sit alongside alternative goals such as policy, evaluative or even emancipatory objectives.

Appropriately enough, in making a case for a greater interest in developing theory through ethnography, an empirical success story is appealed to. Strong's work on Goffman is applied to demonstrate how past ethnographic fieldwork has succeeded in refining theoretical ideas. The ultimate aim of this case study is to inspire the flourishing qualitative, ethnographically-orientated research tradition to engage more proactively with an interactionist theoretical agenda. This continues Hammersley (1992) and Atkinson's (2005) various calls for qualitative/ ethnographic research to be more minded towards its theoretical antecedents and that that both theory and method have much to gain from a closer dialectic.

² The would-be ethnographer is now overwhelmed by the number and range of textbooks available: from the generic introduction (Brewer 2001); the manual for the more experienced (Atkinson et al. 2003); to the sub-discipline-specific texts (Pole and Morrison 2003; Delamont 2001).

Strong and Goffman: the case study.

Atkinson and Housley (2003) identify Strong's (2001) [1979] study of the ceremonial order as an example of fieldwork based theoretical development that is, to their knowledge, unanalysed as an example of theoretical accumulation, despite being "one of the classic works" (Black 1996:2) and "being widely read, cited and pinched" (Bloor 1996:552). Such examples are rare (Hammersley 1985, 1992). Strong's (2001) was one of two, interconnected monographs to have emerged from a single fieldwork project (Strong 2001; Davis 1982). Atkinson and Housley (2003) note that the differences between them has not been examined in detail³ and this article does not examine the contrasts and connections (Bloor 1996) between the monographs, but rather it focuses upon Strong's monograph and subsequent commentary on that work (Strong 1988) as a case study model of empirical theoretical accumulation.

On closer inspection, Strong's work is intriguing on two grounds. First, as a rare example of an ethnography containing a theoretical accumulation agenda and, second, as a sustained attempt to follow Goffman's sociological legacy. For Bloor, "it has come to represent a systematic empirical demonstration of the analytic potential of Goffman's writing in a particular field setting" (Bloor 1996:553). In respect of the latter, that Strong's self-confessed passion (Strong 1983, 1988; Bloor 1996; Murcott 2006) took him in this direction is unusual. Not in the sense that Goffman is an obscure, unpopular sociologist, quite the contrary (cf. Williams 1986; Manning 1992, Goffman 1997; Fine and Smith 2000; Smith 2006), but rather that not many have

³ Davis (1982) in his acknowledgements, and somewhat confusingly, points out their different objectives.

attempted to develop his ideas so explicitly⁴. Strong offers his own detailed, reflexive account of his approach to pursuing Goffman (Strong 1988). It is this, key article (Strong 1988) and Strong's (2001) research monograph that inform the argument made here, as others have commented upon Strong's work and legacy elsewhere (Black 1996; Bloor 1996; Murcott 2006; Pope 1995; Dingwall 2001a).⁵ The opening quotation by Strong, back in 1969, reveals that his interest in taking some of the questions raised by interactionism into the field long pre-date the study itself. It is towards this wider agenda – how ethnography can contribute to theory – that Strong's work is used here, rather than his specific accumulation of one of Goffman's ideas.

Strong on Goffman

A significant proportion of Strong's (1988) article focuses upon the dilemmas and pitfalls associated with following Goffman. This is an important and essential prelude, as Goffman's sociology defies ready categorization and there is no single, clear direction that can be readily identified when appraising Goffman (Williams 1986; Williams 2007). Strong (1988) perceived that this was due to Goffman's "idiosyncracies⁶," so whilst clearly an admirer, Strong was not blind to what he politely termed Goffman's "theoretical and empirical frailties" (Strong 1988:229). In his lectures on Goffman, Strong also interestingly avoids over-identifying himself with Goffman's position. For Strong, these frailties were inherent in both Goffman's *method* and his *theoretical ideas*:

⁴ Whilst many studies draw upon Goffman's ideas in a more general sense (often uncited), Strong was unique in his explicit and extended focus upon one of Goffman's ideas on ritual order and because he contextualized these ideas within Goffman's wider conceptual legacy and subjected them to empirical testing.

⁵ Murcott's (2006) preface to her edited collection of Strong's work invites readers to see the persistent elements across Strong's thinking. This is an important take on Strong that will be returned to.

⁶ Perhaps here this is a symptom of Goffman's striving for the interaction order to be taken seriously – hence the myriad of labels, concept and angles.

[He was] a cynic, a wit and a literary stylist; all potential sources of misunderstanding [...] In addition to these sins, he invented a cornucopia of theoretical terms – but changed them in almost every book (Strong 1988:230).

For Strong, an ethnographer with a zest for fieldwork (Bloor 1996; Black 1996), the challenge was clear:

He never studied the minutiae of any particular ceremony, never systematically examined any specific rules of relevance or irrelevance, never rigorously probed the workings of this, or that, ritual equilibrium. For some this is a terrible fault but [...] Goffman was not a researcher in any conventional sense. He was a theorist working in an unexplored area, trying to make some sense, as best he could, of a huge and unfamiliar terrain. What he has to offer is, therefore, an array of (merely) plausible ideas – of possible forms processes, rules, tasks and problems. Of course, Goffman's best may still turn out to be better than most others. But when we get right down and look in detail at a particular bunch of encounters, *who knows what we will actually find?* (Strong 1988:234-235, emphasis added)

In Goffman, Strong perceived a rich mine of ideas that Goffman himself had not subjected to systematic or rigorous empirical study. Goffman's own commitment, as best it can be summarized, was to establish the interaction order with a phenomenological content as an important domain warranting serious sociological attention. He was, at it were, exploring new virgin territories and it was left to others to seek more substantiated conclusions. In his final paper (his presidential address to

the American Sociological Association,) he reflected that he did not feel “our claims can be based on magnificent accomplishment. Indeed I've heard it said that we should be glad to trade what we've so far produced for a few really good conceptual distinctions and a cold beer” (Goffman 1983:17). His ideas therefore form a basis for potential for future theoretical development or accumulation. Even more tantalizingly, Goffman had left certain avenues that have been neglected by subsequent scholars:

The analysis of etiquette – of that ritual order which links the micro to the macro world, lending weight and stability to each and every encounter – is central to Goffman's writings. Yet most subsequent commentators and researchers have had little to say on ceremony. This article tries to redress the balance (Strong 1988:228).

Strong's task was to develop Goffman's theoretical ideas by empirically examining a ‘bunch of encounters’. As to whether Goffman's ideas can be considered solid enough to constitute ‘theory’ Strong was again well versed regarding Goffman's proclivities, arguing that “Goffman may have changed his terms but he rarely changed his tune” (Strong 1988:228). It is on this assumption of a consistency in *theoretical ideas* within Goffman's work, rather than the existence of a grand meta-narrative or fixed method, that Strong worked.⁷

⁷ This is a significant assumption. Not all commentators on Goffman would agree with such an interpretation. However, as Goffman himself argued, his work was for others to interpret and then work from their interpretation. He could not dictate a reading (see Verhoeven 1993).

Strong on Goffman on rituals.

Strong's (1988) chapter explicated his approach to rendering Goffman's work empirically testable. There is a real risk here that Strong misinterpreted Goffman's work and/ or that Goffman himself would resist any such attempt to systematize his work and construct systematic theory. Certainly, Goffman (1983) expressed his distain for those with the temerity to attempt the latter during his lifetime. But he also observed that:

It seems to me that you can't get a picture of anyone's work by asking what they do, or by reading explicit statements in their text what they do. Because that's by and large all doctrine and ideology. You have to get it by doing a literary kind of analysis of the corpus of their work. (Goffman, in Verhoeven 1993 [1980]:313).

The above could be read as permission to proceed in any direction (whereas Goffman himself was focused on the same track and with the same purpose⁸). Indeed, perhaps this reveals a much wider problem with Goffman's work, namely, that it has become just about anything to anyone. Strong, at least, provides a detailed explication of his take on Goffman's analysis – and certainly in greater depth than Goffman tended to himself.

First, Strong evaluated Goffman's work on the ritual order before moving to devise “systematic ethnographic methods for its [further] analysis” (Strong 1988:229). On

⁸ Although some disagree that Goffman was consistent, they detect the outlines of a theory of an interaction order across his work (see Rawls 1987).

Goffman's approach to theorizing rituals, Strong (1988) immediately perceived some difficulties:

Since he was primarily a theorist he was not too fussy about the means by which he derived his terms, or the manner in which others might operationalize them. And since he was driven on by his desire to map, however provisionally, the many contours of his presumed newfound domain, he tended to love the view he had just noticed and be bored by autobiographical exegesis. Precisely how he had got there, how one foray linked with another, were usually matters of little interest. Thus the more systematic explorers who plod after him are faced with both a vast terrain and, littered across the landscape, a multitude of exploratory terminologies, most of them intriguing but many apparently abandoned. (Strong 1988:230)

Strong's reading of Goffman on rituals perceived the metaphors of *play* and *frame* (for example, the rules of the game) to be central. Rather than frivolous, Strong argued that Goffman's use of these metaphors was central to the interactional order – in that they addressed the very construction of social reality:

Mutually sustaining a definition of the situation in face-to-face interaction is socially organized through rules of relevance and irrelevance. These rules for the management of engrossment appear to be an insubstantial element of social life, a matter of courtesy, manners, and etiquette. But it is to these flimsy rules, and not to the unshaking character of the external world, that we owe our unshaking sense of realities (Goffman 1961, cited in Strong 1988:232).

Following Goffman, Strong argued “the ceremonial order of the encounter, the etiquette that can be found on any social occasion, is not some trivial matter, of interest solely to mothers, pedants and social climbers, but has instead a profound importance for the viability of the micro-social order” (Strong 1988:231).

Sociologically, this is where the action is. As such, Strong (1988) perceived that “the little world of the encounter is not a fragile thing. Instead, it is an extraordinary robust structure, capable of ignoring all kinds of routine trouble” (Strong 1988:232). As such, it warranted serious sociological attention.

Unraveling the encounter further, Strong (1988) perceived two tensions in Goffman's thinking. First, a Machiavellian focus on explicating “merely overt ceremony,” performativity and covert power and, secondly, a more Durkheimian concern with wider social values that ceremony celebrates irrespective of dubious outcomes (Strong 1988:233).⁹ From this, Strong assumed any investigation of ceremony must consider both overt and covert power in interaction – and also this celebratory aspect of ritual. In this, Strong noted Goffman's emphasis upon idealisation, which is “essential to proper performances; it is in this sense that the world is a wedding” (Strong 1988:234).¹⁰ This also echoes Goffman's work on Felicity's condition – the obligation within all social actors to demonstrate competence through their social actions, not that they always chose to do so (see Goffman 1983).

In summary, Strong (1988) proceeded into the field equipped with Goffman's emphasis upon (a) the sociological significance of the encounter; (b) that wider power relations have a bearing upon how negotiations play out inside an encounter and;

⁹ Here, writers on Goffman have often perceived him to be amoral (Willmott et al. 1979). However, there is an argument to be made that his was a critique of power relations and inequalities in society (Williams 2007) and Strong certainly represented Goffman as such in his lectures.

¹⁰ “The world, in truth, is a wedding” (Goffman 1959:36).

finally (c) that hence the definition of the situation achieved in an encounter is both controlled and controlling:

idealization and celebration is a joint task in which everyone has a part to play; but at the same time it is based on a purely temporary agreement. The ritual order is simply an overt display, a performance, which may well conceal great covert differences in opinion and power. Some people may be forced to celebrate against their will. Finally, the moral rules which compose any particular ritual order get their sustained reality from a further set of rules – rules of relevance and irrelevance – which govern precisely which matter the participants may focus on and those which they must gloss over and ignore. The joint idealization of this (often) purely working consensus depends on a shared and systematic inattention to anything that might disrupt the overt order of things. (Strong 1988:234)

To take this focus into the field, Strong was well aware that society offered a whole myriad of different encounters:

Goffman's theory of the ceremonial order of encounters could be explored in many ways. The way I chose was to concentrate on just one type of encounter – paediatric consultation – and to explore this via intensive ethnographic methods (Strong 1988:235).

Strong's fieldwork

The fieldwork was conducted in the UK and the USA and formed part of a wider project with co-researcher Alan Davis. Their specific focus was upon power and

ceremony as played out in encounters inside the medical setting. Whilst only medically-related encounters, the potential to be highly varied and challenging in terms of seeking a pattern and also in physically managing a substantial dataset. As Strong himself described, the task was to “gather systematic data (via handwritten verbatim notes) on the interaction in 1120 paediatric encounters” (Strong 1988:235).

The setting of the encounters was located inside a clinic and one hundred observations were made in an “eastern city of the United States” including both fee-paying (private), charity and others paid for by the Federal Government and a thousand were also conducted in a Scottish city (of similar size to its American counterpart) that were all National Health Service (NHS) clinics (state-funded) (Strong 1988:235). The dataset crosscut different types of clinic and therefore inevitably included different doctors (N=40), “though focussing principally on just a handful” (Strong 1988:235). The fieldwork was conducted over a period of three years and, in overview, contained many of the essences of an ethnographic approach; immersion; observation; and emphasis upon unfolding interaction (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007).

Rather than apply a working hypothesis or anticipating in some way what may occur in the consultations, Strong applied another of Goffman's concepts – systematic inattention – to his fieldwork. Simply, this sought to understand what facework underpinned a ‘successful’ encounter (and hence avoided an unsuccessful one). This was an exploratory approach, but immediately created the dilemma of “how to discover what might have been there but was instead systematically excluded?” (Strong 1988:235). In other words, how to problematize the encounter of patient and doctor in the clinic and hence render its contents open to critical analysis?

Strong focused upon the participants themselves and the role they fulfilled in the encounter's ritual pattern. This led him to comment upon the medical authority and competence of key actors, for instance, "the portrayal of the doctor as obviously and necessarily competent [that] depended simply on being a doctor" (Strong 1988:235). In overcoming this impasse, Strong used the same technique Goffman had applied to damaged social identities – by looking for the exceptional case. As Strong noted, "how does the fish get to notice that it is surrounded by water (since it is there all the time)? Only when it is hooked out on to dry land, when it encounters the *deviant case*" (Strong 1988:236, original emphasis).¹¹ The breakthrough, 'deviant' case emerged from the American dataset. In contrast to the UK clinics, which were all in National Health Service (NHS) and hence government funded contexts, the American dataset contained both fee-paying and voluntary/ charity settings:

In the United States one saw, at least in some clinics, routine happenings that never or almost never occurred in any Scottish clinic [...] what was systematically absent from most NHS consultations [...] routine occurrences in private practice revealed systematic absences in that of the NHS (Strong 1988:236, 237).

This distinguished between patients and their orientation towards their fee-paying status, or lack thereof, as "Scottish patients [Strong refers to the parents here] never displayed such open consumerism [as their American equivalents]" (Strong 1988:237). The way in which Strong had collated his data – including the basic constitutive data for every encounter – allowed the differences to be traced. These

¹¹ Murcott (2006) notes that this was a technique Strong returned to across his career.

included: the beginning of the consultation ("the 'workup' by an intern"); social class; what level of decision-making has already taken place prior to the encounter (e.g. whether the patient has already seen another specialist and is seeking another opinion); rights and practice (i.e. the right to a second opinion which "in practice few patients dared"); and the private/ NHS patients and doctors distinction already noted (Strong 1988:37, op. cit).

Strong went on to use this distinction between private and NHS consultations to unravel the encounter in greater depth. For example, as to whether doctors chose to comment on other doctors' views (rarely in the case of NHS consultations), Strong found that "what is for sale here are highly specific skills and contacts [...] colleagues are also competitors; patients can and do go elsewhere" (Strong 1988:238).

Therefore, the doctor's authority could be challenged – but only in certain contexts.

The exact circumstances of such contexts led Strong to focus expressly upon dominance and passivity and he then used his fieldwork data (now that he knew what he was looking for) to seek out further examples for analysis.

The analytic breakthrough was therefore significant and drew from his fieldwork and also guided the unfurling process of analysis. Strong adapted his methodology to test his idea through further fieldwork to discover if they could be supported. He refers to the "careful analytic techniques" of constant comparison (Glaser 1964) and analytic induction. His approach therefore contained two, relatively distinct approaches to theorizing: one generating; another testing. From Goffman came the initial conceptual focus that informed new empirical research examining in a specific social context; with that body of data came a theoretic breakthrough and further analysis of

that dataset refined that theory. So in the second (perhaps more traditional) stage of his research, Strong is merely detailing the “sequence of data-gathering and hypothesis-testing until no further body of data produces any significant modification to the developed hypotheses” (Strong 1988:239). It is a clear process of cyclic analysis in which theory and method intertwine and is close to the model of analytic induction that Hammersley (1992) values as a means to achieve theoretical development through ethnographic research. The quality of Strong's initial dataset as well as his rigor in going through that dataset again and again was essential to his task:

My data were collected all in one go. So, instead, I simply divided them; the first half being used to generate detailed hypotheses (via constant comparison) about the ritual order of the paediatric clinics; the second half to test those same hypotheses. How, then, did Goffman's theory of encounter etiquette stand up? (Strong 1988:239-240)

The development and refinement of Goffman's theory of encounter etiquette.

Strong followed Goffman's example by delineating the roles found in encounters. Using his ethnographic data that detailed the minutiae of the exchange, Strong confirmed “that each [of the] participants was offered a heavily idealized public character (whatever their private qualities) and the combined set of ceremonial identities formed a harmonious and smoothly interlocking whole” (Strong 1988:240). For example, on “consultation etiquette”, (Strong 1988:240) identified two equally central dimensions to the ceremonial order: the “technical competence of server and

client” and “their moral character” (Strong 1988:240). These were overpowering in their active construction of a morally sound character, even despite evidence to the contrary. For example, “every Scottish mother was nominally treated as loving, honest, reliable and intelligent” (Strong 1988:240) even in such instances where the baby was grossly overweight. It was this element – of the moral character of the patient – that Strong further addressed in close detail and which is therefore the element of Goffman’s work he developed. That is, the active maintenance of the moral character of patients in the ritual order of the encounter – and the circumstances in which this could be breached.

Strong found that three qualifications could be made to Goffman’s notion of polite disattention or what Strong referred to as the ‘rules of irrelevance’. “Rules of irrelevance enabled a prolonged mutual engrossment in the action almost regardless of circumstance” (Strong 1988:241-242). The first of these qualifications or exceptions is what Strong termed “*the unmentioned ideal*” (Ibid, original emphasis). Here Strong argued that the “rule of irrelevance could go rather further than Goffman implies” (Strong 1988:242). Indeed, that in *not* making something out to be significant revealed its very significance. That is, it was “the routine omission of the very things that were being idealized” that proved important in his observations (Strong 1988:242). Strong, with characteristic style, was celebrating the tension between the fragility of the encounter and its controlling characteristics:

A ritual is thus involved but one of some delicacy. This is (quite often) one of those religions where the name of God cannot be mentioned. (Strong 1988:242)

The second qualification or adaptation that Strong made to Goffman addressed ceremonial orders. This is was perhaps the most significant innovation, as it involved reworking "key aspects of Goffman's theory of etiquette" (Strong 1988:243).

Centrally, this addressed the very possibility of theorizing rituals and:

the crucial issue of the *plurality* of ritual orders. Is the same set of events and roles, the same *activity system* (Goffman 1961c:8) framed in just one standard fashion, all variations being simply variations on a theme, or must we speak of etiquettes instead of etiquette; of distinctive ceremonial orders, each with their own motif? (Strong 1988:243, original emphasis)

Here Strong encounters a difficulty with Goffman: simply that "Goffman's own position [...] hard to judge" (Strong 1988:243), but Strong argued his own position was that:

within any one order, there can be many reasons for variation. [...] However, what that [pediatric] research also revealed was that amongst these consultations there were at least three basic ritual orders. The 'ideal model' which Goffman sketched of the server-client relationship [Goffman 1961] was certainly among these *but it was not the only one*" (Strong 1988:243, emphasis added).

Strong explicated four models of consultation etiquette using his own empirical research: aristocratic; private; bureaucratic and; charity. Essentially, this expanded

and refined Goffman's original model. The criticism of Goffman's basic model is clear: "his assumption of just one ideal form looks rather parochial: ethnocentric, ahistorical and middle class" (Strong 1988:243). Strong's theoretical innovation is therefore the use of Goffman's original theoretical idea with the new characterizations of the server-client relationship.

Strong and the four ceremonial orders.

Strong explicates the four models he identified in the clinic encounters. The most common form of ritual (or ceremonial order) was the 'bureaucratic format' that dominated every Scottish NHS consultation and most non-fee-paying American patient consultations. What he termed the 'charity' and the 'private' modes of exchanges were routinely to be found in server-client exchanges. The bureaucratic mode applied a positive character definition of the client, but this was reversed in the charity and private modes. Hence "every mother was now stupid, lazy and incompetent and unloving, unless she could prove otherwise" (Strong 1988:244). Strong emphasized that this shift held important implications for the individual actor in that it threatened their moral status whereas, in contrast, the other two modes called for only relatively superficial facework. In the charity and private modes, much more was at stake, namely, "the overt and detailed investigation of the moral character of a key participant. Such [...] *character work* [for Strong] is a very different kind of moral work to the cosmetic facework of the [other] two ritual orders" (Strong 1988:244, original emphasis).

This distinction is significant: in terms of the basic claims that it makes for (a) theorizing interactional encounters and (b) the increased capacity of the individual participants to shape the ritual order of the encounter:

This discovery of radically different expressive orders, co-existing within the same type of encounter, is not, from a common sense point of view, particularly surprising. [...] However, it seems to be an important break from Goffman's own discussion of the ritual order. For once we admit the possibility that the same activity may be ritually framed in very different ways, then we also give space for a mechanism through which *systematic variations in the balance of power between participants* may, in turn, have systematic effects upon the ritual order of their encounters. (Strong 1988:244, emphasis added)

The use of the word 'systematic' is important. By emphasizing the balance of power between social actors *outside* of the encounter, Strong is moving to entertain debates relating to "*micro and macro worlds*" or influences outside the encounter, but that nevertheless shape its outcome (Strong 1988:245, original emphasis). For interactionists, the danger here is in doing so, Strong may have moved towards a more structuralist orientation than is ontologically compatible with Goffman's work. That is, his re-working of Goffman's work is such that the essence of the original is lost – the metaphorical baby is thrown out with the bathwater. Fortunately, Strong's sustained interest in Goffman's sociology prevented any superficial reading or application of the latter's work¹² and the macro-micro tension within Goffman's

¹² Indeed, they corresponded during the last few years of Goffman's life.

work, so often discussed elsewhere (Giddens 1988; Chriss 1995), received close attention.

Strong represented his take on Goffman's stance on the agency-structure dualism through the metaphor of a membrane. This membrane separates the encounter from the wider, macro world. Strong perceived that Goffman's sociological interests lay with the *contents* of the membrane, rather than the external macro world itself. However, Strong perceived that the very metaphor of the membrane invites some kind of – admittedly loose – coupling *between* micro and macro worlds.¹³ In turn, coupling implies the capacity for tight or loose-knit couplings and that in tightly-coupled settings, power is more expressly performed:

Nonetheless, the fact that he did not [pay much attention to the influence of the macro world upon the interactional order] does not mean that we cannot. Indeed, it only makes sense to stress loose-coupling, if we also recognize the phenomenon of *tight-coupling* too; that particular power is liable to breed particular ceremony. (Strong 1988:246, original emphasis)

On this point Strong diverges most from Goffman's original position, by arguing that – on occasions – forms of rituals will be more strongly influenced by the external world. That Strong's argument is the outcome of detailed empirical exploration, adaptation and refinement of Goffman's original theoretical statement through an ethnographic research process lends his findings additional weight. It is unlike Goffman's, which can be placed into its historical context (as Strong does) and

¹³ See Weick (1976) for the original application of 'loose coupling' in an organizational context.

understood as part of a programme to map and establish the interaction order as a viable arena for sociological analysis (Goffman 1983). In the case of server-client relations, Strong detailed "a central ceremony which stems from and is tightly linked to the outer world" (Strong 1988:246). In this sense, Strong's understanding of Goffman is that external forces are present, but that the encounter is of key ontological importance. The encounter remains an important site where facework and the moral character of individuals are brought into play.

Summary and conclusion

The article has argued that (1) Strong was able to subject Goffman's ideas to empirical testing and (2) was successful in further developing Goffman's ideas on ceremony. In doing so, he (3) demonstrated that ethnography can be more productive in developing theoretical ideas, but this relied upon Strong's personal enthusiasm for theory and fieldwork. His theoretical empiricism provides an exemplar of the way theory and conceptual refinement can grow as a result of doing ethnography the right way.

Firstly, this (1) required preparing theoretical ideas for empirical testing. Currently, there is an amnesia or lack of preparation in ethnographic research and hence an unfamiliarity with the ontological and epistemological thinking underpinning the use of such an approach (Atkinson and Housley 2003; Atkinson 2005). This is perhaps a result of the explosion in qualitative studies, conducted without due attention to the traditions and theoretical ideas to which they are tied (Pole and Morrison 2003) as competent ethnography is grounded in theory. Strong's preparation and interest in Goffman counters any such criticism. He was also cautious and reminds those who

may follow (despite his own success in relation to the ceremonial order), there is a need to remain modest as to the explanatory power of any given theory:

Such a model needs a good deal of further empirical testing and, besides, even if correct, it is only one of the many, many links which bind the micro to the macro worlds, all of which need detailed exploration. However, if such a program of research were ever to be undertaken, it might no longer be possible to claim that the core matters of sociology could be nicely studied without any reference to the interaction order. But of course, so far at least, we are a very long way off that. (Strong 1988:247).

Secondly, Strong also successfully (2) refined Goffman's ideas, using sound ethnographic research protocols as a basis. The dataset which grounded the analysis was substantial and Strong's zeal for fieldwork clear (observing 1120 consultations across three years). Because Strong takes such an express interest in the development of Goffman's ideas, the piece he offers is highly reflexive in a way that (whilst fashionable now) was unusual in its time. Fortunately, it allows the process through which Strong's own commentary on the ceremonial order emerged to be traced. For example, Strong's interest in structure (which was key to his expansion of Goffman's work) drew from the empirical data when he moved to consider the wider circumstances surrounding the encounter. For example, Strong described a mother and baby from "a family who have been notorious amongst health and social-service staff for three generations" (Strong 1988:240).

There is, at least, the *potential* for a much wider capacity towards generalization:

An intriguing relationship did emerge between the different ceremonial orders and particular balances of power; a relationship which *a priori* seems true not just of paediatric clinics but of many other kinds of customer service, and one which can also be illustrated from a wide variety of other research. (Strong 1988:246-247)

There is cross-site opportunity for analysis as well as focusing down upon how actors' roles are mediated by the more powerful players present in the setting. For example, Strong's (1988) work on the denial of the child's individual autonomy or agency in the medical encounters that he observed is in many senses evocative of the 'new' sociology of childhood's call for a more realized definition of the child as a social actor in their own right (Christensen and Prout 2002; James and Prout 1997; Pole 2007). This is brought into sharp relief in settings or institutions traditionally defined, controlled and regulated by adults. There is a clear mandate for future research to explore these processes.

(3) Yet, given Strong's own success in synthesizing theory and method, does his work on Goffman constitute a model for future ethnographers to pursue theory accumulation programs? What lessons does his work offer us, beyond their specific focus? The lessons are less tangible than an empirical legacy. Foremost, was his skill and disposition towards fieldwork. His close affinity with Goffman's work is evident in his excellent critical obituary (Strong 1983). Such an affinity was crucial, as it was this very predisposition towards Goffman that informed his sustained attempt to develop a theoretical idea through ethnography. In this case study, therefore, it was

his passion for Goffman's works that inspired Strong rather than a wider obligation to be found within sociology to pursue theoretical ideas and theory accumulation (although Strong also draws on Schutz's phenomenology on other projects).

The historical timing and sub-discipline in which Strong worked were also undeniably favorable. In contrast to other examples of theory-accumulation through an ethnographic research process (such as Hargreaves, Lacey and Ball), the medical context of Strong's work was one in which qualitative methods were well established, whereas Hargreaves and Lacey's approaches were critiqued for their lack of observational sophistication (Delamont 1984). Goffman had been seeking to establish the interaction order as a legitimate field of sociological work, whereas Strong enjoyed being part of a wave of interactionist studies reaching across UK sociology – indeed, he was part of its dissemination in various UK universities.

It is this historical context and foundational knowledge of the ideas surrounding the interactional order that underpinned his ethnography. Whereas Goffman could be accused of conceptual imperialism, for Strong, the theoretical tail was not wagging the empirical dog. His work reminds us that that claims made on the basis ethnographic evidence should be reasonable and also constitute some form of 'rolling program' of theoretical ideas. Bloor (1996) noted that Strong's "death robbed us of our most accomplished essayist"¹⁴ and he further suspected that this was where Strong's contribution to sociology would lie (Bloor 1996:551). But such style was underpinned by substance. For Strong shows how theoretical accumulation can take place through ethnographic research. The best of Goffman's theoretical richness

¹⁴ Referring to the medical sociology community.

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wedded to excellent ethnographic practice. This model, of consistent theoretical commitment alongside empirical substance, is both a rich, modest and demanding one to which future ethnographers can aspire.

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