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# The beautiful in the commonplace

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**ABSTRACT** During fieldwork in a rehabilitation institution for drug abusers, I<sup>1</sup> became aware that certain, apparently commonplace, informal interaction situations between residents and staff appeared to constitute emotionally moving and identity-constructing situations which apparently had a great impact on the residents. These situations seem, on the surface, to be trivial, minor, superficial and very common. Still, and perhaps because of their ‘smallness’, they show qualities that suggest authentic interaction, immediate and unfeigned, by participants. This article draws upon an analysis of what I have called ‘love-bearing interaction situations’ (Skatvedt, 2001) and connects this with theoretical insights drawn from the work of Erving Goffman and Johan Asplund, and from Howard Becker’s labelling theory.<sup>2</sup> Of particular interest is a notion touched upon by Goffman, namely, the expression of love in commonplace interaction.

**KEYWORDS** commonplace interaction, emotions, Goffman, identity, labelling, relations, social encounters

## Introduction

Goffman briefly touches upon the notion of the expression of love in commonplace interaction:

These two tendencies, that of the speaker to scale down his expressions and that of the listeners to scale up their interests, each in the light of the other’s capacities and demands, form the bridge that people build to one another, allowing them to meet for a moment of talk in a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement. It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world. (Goffman, [1967] 1982: 116–7)

Like Goffman, I am concerned with the face-to-face situations of everyday life in my fieldwork at The House, a Norwegian residential rehabilitation institution for adult drug abusers.<sup>3</sup> I first became aware of the ‘specialness’ of the commonplace when one particular situation had an impact on me. I had had a very heavy, lonely and fruitless day as a researcher in the field,



and my morale was low. I felt invisible and useless. I sat in the living room, messing about with my apparently meaningless field notes. The House was empty, except for Tom, one of the residents, who was clearing up the kitchen. All of a sudden he stood in the doorway to the lounge and shouted enthusiastically: 'Hey Astrid, I've saved the day! I found a bag of coffee when I cleaned behind the freezer!' I thought that they had run out of coffee and answered politely, 'Ok, that's good.' In a place like The House it is important to have enough coffee, and though I was pleased with this news, it was not in itself of particular emotional significance. The impact of the situation came from Tom's use of my name, and he had beamed at me while sharing the satisfaction of his discovery. I had a clear and immediate experience of being made into a 'somebody', 'one of us', when he addressed me in this way. Tom's interaction with me thus constituted an identity-constructing situation. I, who at that point had felt like 'nobody', was touched by being made 'someone' to whom it was important to tell something vital. At that moment I began to believe I could achieve something at The House after all. I started to understand the power and magnification of such moments of commonplace contact. I have previously termed interaction situations like this one 'love-bearing' (Skatvedt, 2001). I wish to investigate here what characterizes situations like these, and how they can best be understood.

This article concerns feelings, but not emotions in the traditional sense. I am concerned with situations that, relatively speaking, are trivial, apparently superficial, which occur frequently. Still, and perhaps because of their smallness, they show qualities of authentic interaction, immediate and unfeigned. The type of interaction situation in question does not appear as an intimate or expressly loving interaction in the usual sense, that is, as *particularly* intimate, passionate, private or even necessarily personal. According to the residents, such interaction did not even have to be pleasant; it had to carry what might be called signs of life, the opposite of indifference. With Asplund (1987: 11), we can regard interaction situations like these as illustrations of 'social responsivity'.

As the title of his essay 'Alienation from Interaction' ([1967] 1982) suggests, Goffman writes primarily about rituals of degradation and meetings between people that have a problematic nature. The quotation above is a rare exception from this focus. Goffman often highlights the processes and consequences of following or not following implicit rules in interaction. In this article, however, I will emphasize the last three lines of the quotation in examining what might be happening when people meet in such a way that the world lights up for them. I wish to describe the love-bearing interchange as a social phenomenon in everyday life and to suggest a theoretical understanding of situations of this kind. While we are concerned to indicate directions for further analysis and theorizing, the focus of this article will be on empirical material and analysis. It is beyond the scope of this article to argue an elaborate theoretical base.



## Material and method

My fieldwork is an ethnographic study which has much in common with the tradition exemplified by Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) from a psychiatric ward in the USA; Løchen's *Idealer og realiteter* [*Ideals and Realities*] (1984) from a psychiatric hospital in Norway; Mathiesen's *The Defences of the Weak* (1965) from a Norwegian prison; and Album's *Nære fremmede* [*Close Strangers*] (1996), an analysis of patient-to-patient interaction in a Norwegian somatic hospital. Goffman, Løchen and Mathiesen have been identified as 'sociologists of the underdog'. In contrast, and like Album, I focus on aspects of the treatment institution and its activities that appear to be affirming and positive.

I have taken a phenomenological approach to the field. I seek to present a description of daily life at The House as close as possible to the residents' own. That is to say, this article is a matter of naturalistic sociology (Schatzman and Strauss, 1973). My aim has not been to gather large amounts of quantitative material nor to make comparisons. My wish is to present 'thick descriptions' of interaction situations (Geertz, 1973). The data upon which this analysis is based consists of interviews, field note descriptions of both formal and informal interaction<sup>4</sup> and reflective notes about these observations and descriptions. The House is a Norwegian state-run rehabilitation institution for people with drug-related addiction problems. It offers a treatment program that runs for one year from admission, with one-and-a-half years of follow-up, for which the County Social Services is responsible. The residents of The House are male and female, are admitted voluntarily, and had a mean age of 30 years when the fieldwork was carried out. There is accommodation for 26 residents who must be drug-free on admission. Most residents have been in a detoxification unit before entry, until they can provide 'clean' urine samples. Some come directly from prison after finishing their sentences, while some are serving sentences for various offences while resident at The House. Most have had contact with rehabilitation units previously and are very experienced both as drug users and as treatment clients.

I was a participant observer at The House for a total of one year. I came and went as I wished, living and working with the residents for shorter and longer periods of time. I had my own residential room in which I slept. My job was to perform the same tasks as the newest residents: tidying, cleaning, setting the table for meals, cooking, dishwashing, laundry, gardening, maintenance work on the buildings and so forth. I received my instructions from the resident who was leader of the work team to which I belonged. I took part in organized activities, both formal and informal, such as individual consultations, therapy groups, meetings, recreational trips, parties for friends and family, visits to the movies and so on. The residents and I were together for most of the time we were awake during the day, with our final meeting each day typically in the bathroom, brushing



our teeth together. I am confident that this participatory observation was essential to my goal of close contact with the residents. It might be argued that I was in danger of getting too close, of 'going native', but the fact that I came and went and had periods away from the field has probably reduced this problem.

My study is resident-centred in the sense that I have chosen not to focus on staff members' perspectives or interpretations or evaluate their activities. This does not mean that I was not aware of the staff's presence, but I deliberately chose an exclusive focus on the residents instead. While I did on occasion have brief chats with staff members, a resident was always present. It has been important for me to keep a significant distance from the staff culture, as staff members function as both therapists and guards. I wanted to come as close to the resident world as possible, and distance between the staff and myself was necessary for this. The limitation is that I did not access staff members' points of view. To my knowledge, the staff did not perceive this as unfair. Rather, they seemed profoundly interested in the knowledge that research like this could give them.

It seemed essential for the residents that I had a clearly defined role as a non-staff member and as a participant on a resident level, with the distinction that I had different goals for my stay from those of the other residents. 'C'mere!! I need somebody for the dishes! ... Heh heh, no no! I was only kidding!' was the first comment I received when I arrived to start my fieldwork. The residents expressed great surprise at the fact that I wanted to be only with them. They would have been less surprised at this had I been younger (I was in my forties during the fieldwork); apparently I had broken with the residents' expectations of what women my age do (or do not do). I believe that this breach was one reason I easily obtained their permission to enter their world and was considered trustworthy. It seems clear to me that my insights into the 'moving' aspects of daily life at The House were possible because I lived and worked solely with the residents over time. They were the ones from whom I needed recognition, both in order to 'get inside' The House and to avoid becoming isolated in the field. Because I was neither staff nor resident, and there were no other researchers present, I had in a way a meagre identity at The House. Tom had made it richer in a moment by calling to me when he found the bag of coffee.

Empirical material like this is difficult to structure into manageable categories. Quite early on, I started to systematize data through a counting method. I went through the data in order to find out which types of situations the residents talked most about when they spoke about 'good' situations, and what characterized them. The concepts I have used are a mixture of the residents' language of description and my own interpretations of what I heard and saw, with care taken to preserve the informal language of each.<sup>5</sup> I ended up with 21 different 'good' interaction



forms between residents and staff. These were gathered into three types of situations: emotionally loaded situations, personal situations and commonplace situations (see Appendix). They have different principal features and are not mutually exclusive categories. The fact that they have features in common, e.g. 'good' and 'everyday', made it a challenge to make the implicit particularities explicit.

## **Client-centred research**

During the last decade there has been increasing interest in clients' theories of change. There are many substantial contributions, such as Duncan and Miller's *The Heroic Client* (2000) and *The Heart and Soul of Change* edited by Hubble et al. (1999), which presents analyses of the extensive literature on working elements in therapy. Their attention is to common factors shared by all therapy orientations. According to Asay and Lambert (1999), the therapeutic relationship and extra-therapeutic events are two common factors that together count for 70 percent of improvement in psychotherapy. Therapeutic technique accounts for only 15 percent. This literature seeks to present a client-theory approach. I agree about the importance of this approach, though I find it too expert-centric. The studies I refer to above seem to have one feature in common: data on clients' theories of change is, to a large extent, collected on the expert's premises, from the expert's perspective, in his or her office, using categories stemming from the expert. This type of data reflects to a lesser extent the client-world and the client's categories, conceptions, beliefs and understanding. The 'client-centred knowledge' produced is, so to speak, 'therapist-oriented' – it comes from above. Hubble et al. (1999) have made important contributions to the search for clients' theories. But their knowledge rests on a powerful clinical understanding of where and how we can get insights into processes of change.

Glen Gabbard (2006: 1667) writes that a tremendous amount of research shows that psychotherapy has value within the psychiatric field. However, when it comes to understanding how it works, we know very little. He writes that when psychotherapists ask their patients about what has been helpful, the patient's fondest memory may be a joke that the therapist told, and not his or her brilliant therapeutic technique. He points to the lack of data illustrating the active aspects of the therapeutic endeavour and presents a new article (Høglend et al., 2006) in which the authors conclude that the establishment of a good treatment relationship can be an active ingredient in psychotherapy. These studies must be said to be very different from my own: they are quantitative and medically oriented and concern patients who are, it must be said, more ill upon admission to therapy than are the residents of The House. However, Høglend et al. do direct their attention similarly toward the treatment relationship and patients' perspectives on it.



## Rich ordinarinesses

Ordinary everyday interaction, despite its mundane nature, can be 'moving', emotionally and psychologically, and can enable those involved to reach another, preferably better, place in their biography by changing existing or adding new narratives or stories about themselves. In addition, such interaction constitutes the majority of face-to-face interactions that people have in the course of most days. Institutions like The House represent a society in miniature where social life is pared down to its essential elements. Social interaction at The House took place in frames that were readily accessible to the researcher. The residents appeared to be very conscious and attentive observers. They were good at catching what was going on in different situations and between different persons with what might be viewed as over-sensitivity to subtle signals and cues. Most residents had extensive experience as substance abusers and therapeutic clients, and were probably especially observant because this had been a necessary skill in order for them to function 'outside'. As one resident remarked:

You know, you do have to have reasonably good antennae to catch moods and what's in the air and ... of course we see, we're experts in seeing, understanding how people think, how they feel and all – we've had to be!

This skill is probably connected to the fact that the activity they have in common is illegal. They cannot be straightforward in approaching other people, in order to get the next 'fix', unless they are sure about who they are. The residents often made jokes about being able to spot the police, a social worker, a childcare employee or a drug addict from a distance, no matter where they were. Those who were good at observing people and their possible intentions usually seemed to have been good at staying out of trouble with the authorities.

Finding meaning in the social and cultural context of The House was more of a challenge for residents, as it was a very different context from those with which they had usually been familiar. One tendency I noted was for residents to fix upon, and express being strongly moved by, features of normal interaction that others might take for granted. This might have something to do with the residents having what might be called 'meagre identities' or 'fragile selves' (Album, 1996). The residents have had to abandon most of their identity in the world outside as part of their work on change. They are, in a sense, in search of something or somebody who can tell them 'who they are'. I favour a concept of identity similar to that sketched by Goffman ([1967] 1982: 84) when he writes that 'the individual must rely on others to complete the picture of him of which he himself is allowed to paint only certain parts'. The self is understood here as a dynamic phenomenon that emerges and develops through self-reflection and in cooperation with important others. According to the residents, the staff are these significant others. The residents seemed so



hungry for identity signs that they fixed attention even on non-noteworthy elements of interactions, looking for signs that reflected back to them that they were more than undignified ‘junkies’. Goffman ([1967] 1982) writes about the self as both one’s own product, in the sense that we choose how we present ourselves to others, and also as a result of interaction with others, during which we receive symbolic messages or signs about who we are. This idea fits well with the ‘counter’ labelling process which I will introduce here.

In a similar sense to Durkheim (1965), Goffman views the self as a sacred object, but for him, selves are acknowledged as ‘holy’ through innumerable small and everyday interaction situations. This makes everyday interchange (such as that between staff and residents) into symbolic interaction with the distinction of ritual. According to Goffman ([1967] 1982), we have a tendency to use and adopt signs that mediate messages about selves and expose who we are. This implies, as mentioned above, that communication between people is communication about identity.

### **Good labellings and troublesome labellings**

Goffman develops Cooley’s (1902) and Mead’s (1962) ideas about the self as product of social interaction, and there are similarities between Goffman (1966, 1990) and Becker (1997) in this regard. Both have common roots in Cooley and Mead: Mead’s (1962) writings about the self suggest a notion of labelling, in that the individual *becomes* a human being by ‘seeing one’s self through others’ eyes’. All four have developed models of socialization. Cooley and Mead write about how selves are created through primary socialization, whereas Becker and Goffman present the self as a result of secondary socialization, although Becker is more of a *relationist* where Goffman is a *situationist*. Both understand the self as manifold; it can be created and recreated, and resocialized. Asplund (1987), to whom I will return later, can also be said to espouse a socializing model.

Becker’s (1997) labelling theory is thus attached to an interactionist tradition and is frequently used as a perspective on deviance and deviants as social constructions. According to Becker, a deviant is ‘one to whom that label has successfully been applied’ (1997: 9). Drug users are easily labelled deviants in this sense. Becker declares deviance a consequence of the response of others. A person has become the label when he or she has integrated the identity that is attached to that label and made it his or her own. Becker writes about how one becomes an outsider, whereas our focus is on how one becomes an insider. We see this as the same labelling process, but as ‘counter’, in that it has an opposite and ‘positive’ development. We are concerned with Becker’s understanding of labelling as process. Individuals are assigned identity tags that are visible and clear, both for the bearer and for their social milieu. We use only a small aspect





of Becker's theory on deviance and deviants as social constructions; this is not a critique of his ideas but rather a use of them in inverted form.

According to the residents, the staff appeared as significant others in each resident's identity project. It was the staff who were authorized as labellers and who could declare residents, over and over again, as 'insiders'. Instead of sanctions that declare deviant identities, as in Becker, the residents describe being confirmed as ordinary people. The 'label' of what appears to be the residents' own labelling theory declared 'You are one of us' (normal, worthy). The labelling process took place during informal interaction, in which powerful signs of new, alternative selves were mediated and which gradually accumulated and became 'fixed', thereby beginning to take on the character of permanence.

We view all interaction as rich in meaning, in the sense that interaction mediates symbolic messages about selves, about who we are. The messages or signs conveyed are interpreted by the receiver in different contexts. Goffman ([1967] 1982: 91) writes that: 'The gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all.' Excerpts from residents' stories presented below are illustrations of such rich emptinesses, full of meaning: valuable situations that appear insignificant at first glance. As we shall see, even the slightest hint of recognition of one's own presence was described as conveying messages about one's worth. Knut (a resident) said about one of the staff who often invited him for a cigarette on the 'smoking porch':

She seems to enjoy chatting with me ... 'Come here! Now we're going to have a cigarette,' she says! ... She apparently enjoys chatting with me ... so nice, eh! From a staff member, you know!

The staff member could easily have smoked her cigarette elsewhere, either by herself in peace and quiet, or with a colleague. Knut was made into the sort of person she could enjoy having a cigarette with, and he indicated receiving a message about being 'the same kind of person' as the Others – normal and worthy people. This can be regarded as a feature of a 'counter' labelling process, which takes place again and again in the course of ordinary interaction.

Goffman ([1967] 1982) writes as if the right and proper thing is when interaction follows a pattern that is more or less fixed. But in my empirical material it becomes apparent that interaction can also be successful (and beautiful) by breaching or challenging unspoken norms, rules and expectations about how it is supposed to be enacted.

## **Messages beyond the spoken**

Every morning the residents and I sat on the smoking porch. It was at that time the staff arrived for work. One day, Harald, the manager of The House, approached us. He greeted us and looked very amused and



self-satisfied. He put his bag down beside him, leaned against the rail opposite Kjell and Terje, who sat on a bench, and lit his cigarette. He was more formally dressed than usual. Kjell looked at him with a curious glance and said, 'You're really dressed up, Harald, are you going on a visit today?' Harald answered, 'I am *receiving* a visit today – I'm going to have a meeting with the guys who make decisions about residents' funding. Clothes do have a lot to say when it comes to what one can achieve,' as he leant towards Kjell, smiled and squinted his eyes. They laughed at this and I didn't understand what was so funny. This exchange illustrates what I call 'an advanced sign of affection' – 'teasing' – something which is not immediately recognizable as a sign of love, and often takes a rough form, but declares the situational equality of those involved.

Harald gives signs to the residents that tell them they are included in an area of his private sphere, and that they are significant – for example, indicating he had thought of them that morning while he got dressed. The fact of his dressing up for the meeting holds a different meaning than if he had merely read some papers in order to prepare for the same meeting. The residents receive confirmation that they have left an impression on Harald. The relational proximity between them is reflected in the atmosphere of the interaction, which is characterized by humour, warmth and reciprocity. They stand close to each other, they look at each other, chuckle and exchange glances; they gesticulate, light each others' cigarettes and fetch cups of coffee for each other. Harald could have had his cigarette elsewhere and hurried into his office after a short 'Hi!', but he remained outside instead, 'without reason'. The residents indicated appreciation for this, and it was probably a good experience to be someone with whom the boss wanted to chat and smoke. 'I hear him talk to us the same way he talks to everybody else,' John said.

In spite of the casualness and apparent superficiality of situations like this, they become incidents that hold great significance. These situations are understood as a break with the expected and with the formal social positions of The House. Harald's participation appears authentic and not as a manifestation of his duty. This helps the messages communicated about the selves involved to become valid as 'good labels'. In this way we can say that a labelling process is triggered and maintained with the reverse direction of development from that seen in Becker (1997) – a median labelling, in which residents tend to adopt the self ascribed by significant others, making it their own. I emphasize here that the question of whether this was intended or 'really felt' and 'authentic' from the staff member's side is irrelevant; we cannot know this – the important point is that the residents interpret it as such.

Those who enter the dining room at The House during mealtimes will usually see that staff sit at one table, while residents sit at the others. The atmosphere may vary greatly, from quiet gloominess to hilarious noisiness. It is not usual to discuss personal issues or emotions. Ideally,



mealtime conversation should concern everyday matters, preferably those that are minimally 'loaded'. Martin, a resident, told me about what Siri (a staff member) had said during a short meeting over lunch. A break arose from the usual lunch-frame, and the situation changed character for a moment:

Like she ... Siri, when she came over to me during lunch and said that ... eehh ... after I had a relapse and ... I had some big trouble I hadn't sorted out yet, then she said, 'I've been thinking a lot about you' ... when she says things like that a couple of times, it ... I remember it ... like, I see the picture in my head ... then she stood in front of me, by the coffee machine, pouring coffee and looking at me and then she said it ... and then she looked at me, and then she meant it, she did! When things like that get you in the stomach ... ooohh ... yes ... it goes in, you know! ... Yes.

This meeting had taken place a long time prior to our discussing it, but Martin was still clearly touched when relating it and remembering it. We may say that Siri had distinguished a *footing*, a footing of intimacy, from that of the usual lunch-frame. Goffman (1981: 124) introduces this notion in *Forms of Talk*, suggesting the power of breaks in interaction in which a new 'micro-frame' suddenly appears in the frame. He explicates his definition of 'footing' in a story about an article in a newspaper in 1973: President Nixon signing a bill in the presence of government officers and newspaper reporters in the Oval Office. After the ceremony, he rises and comments, in a teasing way, on the outfit and looks of one of the female journalists. He calls her by her name, uses a cheerful voice, and even gets her to turn around so that everybody can see how nice she looks 'in spite of' her wearing trousers, all of which results in much merriment amongst the press corps and others present, including the woman herself.

Like frames, footings are culturally defined entities with which participants in social life are familiar and which they can use. Small signs might put forward a new situation: a gaze, a change of attention or a special tone of voice. This is what happens in the lunch story, and what contributes emotional force – a sudden break with the predictable flow of events. The concept of footing can be used both for describing a degrading situation for the self and a situation that might be positively magnifying. Both appear as emotionally moving for the one who is the focus of the shift. It is the breach and the emotional dimension that make the communicated sign 'hit home' and 'work', both for Martin and for the journalist and press corps in the Nixon example. We can say the same about the other examples: Tom's discovery of the coffee-bag, Harald and Kjell's talk by the stairs and the staff member's invitation to smoke. If the participants in these situations had not been moved by them in each case, they would have barely registered them, as they would not have had any real significance.

In the meeting by the coffee machine it is not Goffmanian rules for good or expected conduct that make the situation become special; rather,



it is the violation of such rules. Martin says that Siri meant what she said. Objectively speaking, he cannot know anything about this. However, the point is that Martin describes experiencing her behaviour as genuine. It is the registration of breaches, of Siri's and his own emotional reactions, of Siri's gaze, body language, tone of voice, strength of voice that make Martin draw his conclusion about authenticity in the situation. Another resident, John, describes another encounter with a staff member: 'It's just there ... like ... I just feel it, I notice it when he talks with me, like ... that it's not something he says just because it's his job.' The residents' 'feeling' is interpreted as a sign of authenticity in the interaction.

In both the White House situation and during lunch hour by the coffee machine, a high-status participant transforms one of lower status into a specific Somebody: Nixon changes the journalist from a competent reporter into a sweet and naughty, slightly stupid girl at whom everybody laughs. Martin goes from being one of many 'hopeless junkies' to someone with significant meaning for a staff member. Both are apparently moved, but in opposite directions. The stories are illustrations of what Asplund (1987: 11) describes as 'social responsiveness', which can be both light and dark; the socially responsive human being can be both appealing, as with Siri, or offensive, as in Nixon's case.

### **Sanctifying discourtesy**

Martin related a fishing trip that he had taken with Sivert (a staff member) one day, when Sivert had his day off. Martin had been a resident long enough to have permission to leave the premises on his own. The fishing spot was near his home. They had planned to be away all day but had forgotten to bring food. Martin suggested they could eat something at his place:

He wanted to come *fishing* with me! On his *day off*! He came with me to my place, and the way he was at home with me and ... I asked him in for some hot dogs and coffee and things like that, and he was there, it was ... like ... he behaved ... It was so okay! [Martin laughs as he tells me] ... He wasn't there with a strict face on ... like ... 'Here is a staff member' ... you know ... he was just ... 'Hey, shall we eat soon, or what?' ... He was so very okay, it was just like being with a pal ... I thought it was so good that ... I noticed I was different that day there, when we were together.

It is unusual for staff to join clients in activities outside of working hours, and it is generally frowned upon to do so, though I shall not discuss that here. A staff member's wish to participate in something with a resident without 'having to do it' might in itself be a powerful sign of sameness. Sivert's comments about when they were to eat were apparently what made the biggest impression on Martin, and where we find the emotional dimension of the anecdote. It is not very polite to ask, 'Hey, shall we eat soon, or what?' when one is a guest. It is as if Martin highlights the closeness



of the situation through his brusque question. Friendship and intimacy can be declared through rudeness (Album, 1995). Two persons who do not know each other would be unlikely to raise the question of eating at the other's place, as this could easily be interpreted as presumptuous or inappropriate. At the very least, such an inquiry should have been properly framed in a politely formal manner.

Pals can be bad mannered toward one other. It might even be necessary in 'pal-hood'. Martin obviously has experience of such friendship, enabling him to interpret Sivert's question as a declaration of intimacy. We might say that the two of them speak in a Goffmanesque way: they follow the rules of pal-talk. But Martin and Sivert are not pals in the ordinary sense; they are client and therapist. Sivert's question represents a break with expected 'professional' behaviour. In this breach, the Goffmanian 'bridge' is established between them, and they become alike – of the same kind – even if it is for just a moment. Martin receives definition as one worthy of pal-hood from one with the authorization to bestow it. He can acquire a self as an ordinary man through this 'counter' labelling process. Without the breaches I have highlighted, the fishing tour would have been qualitatively different, and potential signs of equality would not have had the same validity. The fishing trip lasted several hours – they had quite possibly talked a great deal of therapy-talk – for instance, men's group talk. But the comment 'Hey, shall we eat soon, or what?' is what Martin presents as particularly important.

Goffman ([1967] 1982: 85–7) writes about the profanation of selves through the use of humiliating talk or other means of degradation. The example of rudeness during the fishing trip illustrates instead how a profaned self (the deviant drug abuser) can be made 'sacred', or worthy. Martin is declared as similar to the Other and thereby also as worthy. He receives a self distinct from the one he usually has at The House. Norms of interaction between staff and clients will, in contrast, often serve the client self (the less worthy self) as the sacred self. For instance, staff members may, with good intentions, present 'over-involvement' (Goffman, [1967] 1982: 122) in interaction with clients. Some might, unwillingly, force intimacy upon clients by using their given name too often and sometimes at the wrong occasion or in the wrong tone of voice. The opposite is nicely illustrated by the resident who told me that he heard that the leader of The House talks to him in the same way that he talks to everybody else (while pointing at the staff members).

In this way, distance between people and differences in levels of worthiness are marked through norms of behaviour. During the fishing trip, Martin is identified as competent, sober and normal; however, he cannot confirm such an identity on his own. Neither can the other residents. This must be done by powerful representatives of the Others, such as staff members. In the example of the fishing trip, it is rudeness and the apparently immediate ease that raises the interaction. Sivert, who has the power of



definition in the situation, breaches the norm-confirmed therapy frame. This is also what happens, though more poetically, in the lunch meeting between Martin and Siri. The fishing trip is prosaic by comparison; it is easier to see the coffee-machine meeting as a beautiful situation, something that can light up the resident's life. There, the sanctifying of the self does not occur through rudeness, but is still a breach of rules governing staff behaviour. These situations appear as identity-construing situations or footings, as links in what I see as a 'counter' or more 'initial' labelling process. It is not what at first appears beautiful or poetic that is the essence of these stories; it is that something greater than the objective quality of the interchange occurs with the sudden breach in the rules of interaction. This suddenness and immediacy make the meta-message of the interaction authentic – it is instantly believable: 'It goes in, it sticks', as Knut said. It is as if the residents' own emotional reactions – that they feel moved – contribute to their interpretation of what is said to be true. Then it is no longer relevant to reflect on whether the other could have meant it or not: 'I just feel it', as John said. The experience of being moved has a logic of its own: 'I'm moved, ergo what was said is true.' These situations appear to transport the resident to another emotional and psychological position in his or her biography. According to the residents, situations like these had a powerful therapeutic potential in enabling them to believe in themselves, by giving hope that they could cope with 'the work' they had to do in order to live a drug-free life.

If we return to the Goffman quotation in the introduction, Goffman's point is that the speakers should do the speaking in the 'right' way so that the world is 'lit up'. One might ask whether it is sufficient merely to 'do it right', in that each participant adjusts 'correctly' in relation to the other. Another question is whether norms, implicit or explicit, might hinder the experience of interaction as an expression of love. It is as much the *breaching* of the norms that regulate interaction between staff and client that seems to comprise the emotional force in the situations I have presented.

## Rules and breaches

In *The Elementary Forms of Social Life* (authors' translation), Asplund (1987) has written about people's alienation from each other when role reasoning characterizes the relation between them. Asplund's role concept is applied to relations characterized by distance, in which participants are established as distinct from one another. He claims that such relations are characterized by an abstract sociality in which one participant sees the other as an abstract member of society and not as a concrete person (Asplund, 1987: 170–3). According to Asplund, this distancing is characteristic of many professional arenas, including care professions such as social work and psychotherapy.



Abstract sociality is the antonym of the social responsivity mentioned above, in which participants take turns in responding to each other's initiatives. In social responsivity, people reverberate with one another, they move and are moved, the opposite of indifference and pretence. Social responsivity demands liberation from rules and formalized action. It demands immediacy: 'A social responsivity that is reined and formalized can no longer be regarded as social responsivity. Interaction that unswervingly follows a protocol is of course not informal behaviour. Social responsivity is characterized by breaches of rules and improvisations' (Asplund 1987: 16–17). Here, Asplund isolates a norm for social responsivity – that it must be immediate. Both Asplund and Goffman refer to the norm of spontaneity, and it would appear that the residents' own theories of interaction are similar in this respect. The point is not whether what goes on is 'good', but that there are response and reciprocation which are not exposed as pretence. Immediacy is necessary for authenticity. If it is lacking, the interaction turns into asocial irresponsiveness and it cannot 'move'. In asocial irresponsiveness, people see each other as 'abstract societal beings', or as Asplundian 'role-occupants'.

According to the residents, the emotional power of their anecdotes is such that they still feel moved in remembering and relating them. The intimations of identity they received from staff members in these interactions have an effect that far exceeds the interactions themselves. Here, they are in agreement with Goffman; one must receive such signs from significant others, people who have the power to declare a resident's identity. In addition, such signs must be mediated in encounters characterized by the spiritual and emotional presence of staff members. This seems to occur most visibly and reliably in everyday interactions in which powerful, identity-constructing messages are conveyed and accumulate to form a new biography for each resident. Such episodes will form part of a continuum in the project of the reflective self (Giddens, 1991). The residents – societal deviants – become labelled 'ordinary' people. In my analysis of residents' reflections on significant interactions with staff, it is precisely commonplaceness and immediacy that come into view as important conditions in the process of acquiring an identity as sober. The commonplace interactions we take part in seem to give us particularly reliable signs of who we are, and they can have greater potential in establishing or labelling worthy identities than more formal interaction situations.

### **The special in the commonplace**

We have seen that everyday interactions are situations in which the self can be acknowledged as sacred and can emerge as worthy, even in situations that are quite profane. One of the findings of the fieldwork is that commonplace interactions between staff and residents seem to have



potential to contribute to new resident narratives. Here, where there is no express therapeutic value, staff and residents can move and be moved and can meet in reciprocity.<sup>6</sup> They can regard each other as what Asplund (1987) calls *concrete persons* – not as abstract members of society: ‘Abstract members of society can neither love nor be loved, neither hate nor be hated. One cannot empathize with them, be compassionate with them, pity them, etc. There is nothing to love, hate, be compassionate about or pity’ (Asplund, 1987: 172). We understand Asplund to claim that human beings are comprised of both an abstract and a concrete aspect. The concrete is the human being of flesh and blood, the one that can be moved and can move in an emotional sense. The abstract individual, on the other hand, houses the *role*, really a copy of one’s self – an abstraction – that can be loved only in an iconic sense, and which can neither move nor be moved by others (Asplund, 1987). In this perspective, both drug abusers undergoing treatment and staff members can appear to each other as abstract individuals – as *occupants* of the role of client or staff member. It is often regarded as ideal to take on different professional roles. However, from an Asplundian perspective, such roles might contribute to the establishment of an abstract sociality at The House, a form of lack of contact. The ordinary, everyday interaction both at The House and ‘outside’, between residents and staff members or others, seems to loosen roles and prepare the ground for situations in which people can meet as concrete persons, where one can love and be loved. Here, one might say with Asplund (1987: 11–12), the participants are enacting social responsivity, ‘an elementary form of social life’.

The introductory citation in this article is taken from *Interaction Ritual* (Goffman, [1967] 1982). Contained in Goffman’s title is the concept of ‘ritual’, and in Asplund (1987) is the concept ‘elementary’. *Rituals* are not elementary in the sense of being fundamental or pre-meditated in the same way that *the elementary* is. Rituals tend to be more managed and rule-based than elementary; they are perhaps a rather formalized further development of elementary forms of social life. It appears that breaches of rules of conduct make the participants return to the ‘elementary’. They fall out of the rule-based situation, not into nothingness, but into a situation that cuts across rules. It is as if some situations have moments of liberating emptiness in which the echo of authenticity can be heard. Perhaps such a ‘clean’ sociality (Asplund, 1987) is a basic human property, where participants are subjects for each other, or where they are ‘just humans together’, as one of the residents said with emphasis.

The fieldwork took place in an institution characterized in part by therapeutic relations. Such relations are norm-laden and governed by rules, limiting the possibilities for staff and clients to relate as concrete persons in an Asplundian sense. While we do not wish to flout the importance of professional ethics of engagement, it is perhaps the case that formalizing interaction also can contribute to distance and alienation between





participants. The empirical material gives voice to the converse need for immediacy and authenticity in such interaction.

### Notes

1. The pronoun 'I' is used in the beginning of this article. Later on we use 'we'. The 'I' refers to the first author's specific experience of the fieldwork that led to the master's thesis *Stories of Love* (Skatvedt, 2001).
2. The article is a revised and developed version of an article published in Norwegian in 2006 (Skatvedt, 2006) in the journal *Sosiologi i dag* [*Sociology Today*], presenting Erving Goffman's writings in a themed issue.
3. The fieldwork was conducted in connection with *Stories of Love* and also the first author's doctoral project, *The Potential of the Commonplace*. The doctoral project is financed by The Norwegian Research Council and The University of Oslo, and will be completed in spring 2008.
4. 'Formal' refers to interaction with a declared therapeutic value, such as individual or group therapy sessions with staff. 'Informal' refers to interaction without declared therapeutic value, such as a resident and staff member having a cigarette together or shopping in the local supermarket.
5. All grammatical irregularities in the original transcribed text have been retained. The second author is a native English speaker who has lived in Norway for 14 years and has translated from the Norwegian with a view to retaining the vernacular and immediacy of the original speech.
6. We have not tried to understand how the staff experience or interpret the situations in question. The focus has been the residents' interpretations, and not whether these are reflected in the staff's understandings. However, we have no reason to believe that the staff's understandings of the situations are fundamentally different from the residents'.

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## Appendix

I have categorized the three types of situation by selecting situations referred to by residents as illustrations of love-bearing togetherness. The formulations below are the residents' own. I have chosen to present them with the prefix 'That the staff ...' in order to regularize them. They are presented in the order in which they arose and in point form:

1. That the staff are personally engaged.
2. That the staff are together with us.
3. That the staff show their feelings.
4. That the staff's initiatives/topics of talk are of a private nature.
5. That the talk is non-therapeutic.
6. That residents feel their own emotional reactions.
7. That the staff are outside their staff role, and are 'just people'.
8. That the staff talk to us as, or treat us as, ordinary people.
9. That we know the staff think about us.
10. That the staff talk, or are, like us.
11. That the staff participate in informal talk there and then.
12. That staff listen and follow along.
13. That the staff ask us for advice.
14. That the staff are honest and fair.
15. That the staff are understanding.
16. That the staff say something about me.
17. That the staff give a hug or a clap on the shoulder.
18. That we can be one-on-one with staff.
19. That the staff show hope and optimism.
20. That the staff show a sense of humour.
21. That the staff participate in ceremonies.

I defined 9 criteria from the 21 types of situation:

1. Personal engagement
2. Emotional expression by staff
3. Own emotional reactions of residents
4. The private nature of talk and address from the staff
5. The staff were 'ordinary people'
6. Staff had thought about the residents outside of work time
7. Everyday, non-therapeutic talk
8. Staff and residents are together outside of the office
9. Residents are talked to like normal people

Of these, the first three illustrate the *emotionally laden* situations. The next three illustrate *personal situations*. The *everyday situations* are illustrated in the final three situational types.