

Solitary Action: Acting on our Own in Everyday Life, by **Ira Cohen**. New York: Oxford University Press. 2016. 217 pp. cloth. ISBN: 978-0-19-025857-3

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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 people's social life is solitary. Cohen references 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.

Professor Cohen first proposes "elements" of solitary action, which he sees as a variant on 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," has "hypnotic" or "structuration" effects, often through setting up rhythmic behavior, and 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 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 bases extensive analysis on abstracted descriptions of activities that are presumptive in that they are subjected to no time/space/person-specific reference.

Basing analysis on abstracted descriptions--there are no fieldnotes that readers can use to assess the theoretical claims--is risky. 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 as they pull one-armed bandits for hours. Within an appreciation of the trip that organizes their day, many often seem 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.

Professor 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 sports writing (for him, a comment reportedly made by Red Smith is enough data to launch extensive comments), plumbers innovating solutions on construction sites (no specific example given), jazz improvisation (drawing on Sudnow's great book), 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 (drawing on autobiographical writings by prisoners) 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." [at p. 11]. An author is free to create definitions but readers will apply empirical tests. It remains to be shown that a binary analysis of some parts of social life as "in interaction" and others as "solitary action" can work empirically, i.e., in precise and replete description. But even before turning to examine cases in detail, problems with his 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.

For Cohen, Goffman and Garfinkel focused only on "social interaction" in a face-to-face or immediate co-responsive context. He is mystified as to why (at p. 38). The reason is that, for both, face-to-face interaction was a strategic focus. Both demonstrated 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 Schutz historically and intellectually, the initial challenge was to understand how people maintain a taken-for-granted assumption of "intersubjectivity," that one's action is ongoingly understood by the other from one's own standpoint. Garfinkel studied face-to-face interaction as more propitious than time and space distant interaction for initially uncovering ethno-methods, i.e., for getting evidence on how people collaboratively sustain the shared presumption that they are "with" another rather than isolated in solitary worlds of experience. In my triple capacity as a 20 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, viz. 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 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 faith that we are acting from the same cultural grounds, understanding each other from each other's perspective, living life together. 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 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 (ala Bachelard), etc. (Schutz made a list that he contrasted with the obdurate moments of social life), an individual is often interacting symmetrically with others over time and space distances, and always at least asymmetrically interacting with others.

Blumer, who does not get cited in this book, said as much, repeatedly and emphatically. H.S. Becker in his work on art, Donald Roy in his research on the factory floor, and Marge 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 other's 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.

Social interaction structures even the solitary activity of many "fantasy worlds," where there is no expectation of others' seeing and responding to one's action in the future, although here the interaction is asymmetric. When reading the 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 t.v. debate with Donald Trump), knowing that Time 2 will never materialize. When, at Time 2, person B reads a novel written by person A at Time 1, B feels threat and joy through inhabiting the social interactions lived in Time Eternal by characters that have become avatars; B, as a reader, enacts the other that A more or less correctly anticipated when writing.

The upshot is not to drop the project of studying solitary action but to require an analysis of dualistic dialectics, ala Simmel, that can appreciate, on the one hand, the constant, subtle, usually tacit work people collaboratively do to deny, mask or transcend solitude in the moments even when social interaction is mutually monitored with open awareness in real time (see Glaser and Strauss); and, on the other, the social interaction that is at the foundations of even the most solitary action, including the playing of solitaire, which is, after all, 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 method of this book is commentary on examples chosen peripatetically by the author. Cohen's book inadvertently makes clear that to appreciate fully the opening it would make, 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 (in notes or with AV equipment) an individual from waking up to sleeping, then analyze the challenges necessary to describe each phase as he or she lives through solitary behavior (revised as "asymmetric interaction") or with others (revised as "symmetrical interaction"), then (please!) make the data set available to others. (One might adapt Maggie Kusenbach's "go along" methodology to produce an individual-based version of the everyday family life project as organized by Elinor Ochs.) 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.