

writing would switch back and forth between the four categories as my observations in the field reminded me of additional field sites I agreed to visit, of something Goffman wrote about, or I simply became aware that I needed some sleep. In the end, the observational and theoretical notes grew into dissertation chapters and journal articles (public knowledge), and the methodological and personal notes remained as private documentation of my struggles as both participant and observer. They remained, in other words, in the back stage arena of my work life – until now.

Start Here → *Act one: battered women's shelter intake*

The Setting: Three of us from the shelter drive to a local motel to do an intake on a woman who has called on the crisis line. The two other women with me are long time shelter workers (it is 5.30 pm – shift change). Normally we do not go to where a woman is directly staying. We meet her in a public place to avoid endangering ourselves. But this woman is afraid she is under surveillance and does not have a car.

Front Stage: We knock on the motel door and a woman's voice asks us through the door who we are, then lets us in. Maria (staff) and Katie (the woman) sit on the bed. Pamela (the other worker) and I sit in chairs on either side of the bed. Katie asks us our names. We tell her and Maria explains, 'we all work in the shelter.' Maria then asks Katie to 'tell us about your situation.' Katie says that she is on SSI (Supplemental Security Income) and had been staying in transitional housing and that one of the counsellors in transitional housing had raped her. She had called the police and filed charges. Her social worker had set her up in the motel. Today – before calling the crisis line – she had received a life-threatening note from the man who had raped her. During the telling of this story both the other counsellors are nodding at Katie. At one point Maria puts her hand on Katie's arm. After about 20 minutes Maria interrupts Katie and says she has to go. The other counsellor Pamela says 'I'll walk you to your car.' I follow them out. Pamela says to Katie, 'I will be right back.' (Field notes 11/18/86)

Implicit to every interaction are front and back stage regions. There are several front stage performances being enacted during this 25 minute interaction. Maria, Pamela, and I are presented as 'all working in the shelter.' No status is given. We are presented as workers in seemingly interchangeable roles. The back stage to this presentation of status consistency is that Maria is a shelter manager, Pamela an intern, and I am a volunteer. We occupy very different positions of status and power within the organization, but present ourselves as status equals. In our performances we also exhibit a consistent message of sympathy (constantly nodding, emitting sympathetic 'umhm's', Maria's hand on Katie's arm), and belief. 'Belief' is performed through the intentional avoidance of certain behaviours: no furrowed brows, raised eyebrows, no questions asked with an inflection of skepticism, no probing inconsistencies. From an organizational perspective we are 'peer counsellors' operating under the feminist and political assumption that women tell the

truth about abuse. We serve women by believing them. Other social institutions have failed women by not believing them.

Back Stage: We walked down the length of the motel porch. Pamela asks Maria what she thinks about Katie's story. Maria says 'we definitely should let her into the shelter.' Pamela agrees nodding and then continues, 'there is something troubling about her story.' Maria, 'I agree, but we need to let her in. At least for tonight.' They both look at me. I nod in agreement . . .

Ten minutes later: After hugging Katie goodbye and telling her we would pick her up at 7.00 pm, Pamela and I are back in the car on our way back to the shelter: I ask Pamela what she finds 'troubling' about Katie's story. She says, 'well, she says she is on SSI and women on SSI sometimes have more problems than we can handle.' 'What do you mean?' I press. 'It's not that I don't believe her, it's just that there are certain inconsistencies in her story. It is difficult to sort out stories like hers.' (Field notes 11/18/86)

The feminist stance of unwavering loyalty and belief is confronted with the exigencies of running an emergency shelter for battered women. In this situation, the team performance of the shelter workers is immediately – though carefully – contradicted upon arrival back stage. What is 'troubling' about Katie's 'story' is not the violence she described, but instead the veracity of her statements. On the porch and in the car – away from the performance in the motel room – the shelter workers indicate some disbelief in Katie's story. While the front stage performance is not entirely contradicted, it is also not entirely over. In the car Pamela's performance continues with me (an agency volunteer) as the audience instead of the client. Though she never says that Katie is lying ('It's not that I don't believe her . . .'), she does draw upon symbols that suggest fabrication or deceit. The use of 'story', the reference to 'inconsistencies', and the necessity of 'sorting out' her words all indicate an underlying current of disbelief.

This telling shift from front stage to back region becomes one of those defining moments for me – one of those interactional planes where I find I must choose. I am a feminist. After coming of age during 'the second wave' of feminism and after 30 hours of domestic violence training I 'buy' the peer counsellor approach. I am a feminist sociologist acutely aware of the privileged interpretive power that I possess (Acker, et al., 1983), I am an agency volunteer who is fully cognizant of the fact that I may, someday, be left 'in charge' at the shelter. There are some women who – though survivors of domestic abuse – have personal needs that are beyond the scope of shelter services. I am a symbolic interactionist. I see the contradiction (the hypocrisy) engendered by this clash of perspectives. I see the emotional danger confronting me (Lee-Treweek, 2000). My response is to slide further into my sociological self. I don't have to live in the contradiction. My job (my moral escape hatch) is to observe interaction, to write about these moments of contradiction, and try to make sociological sense of this slice of social life.

StopHere

→ My job, in other words, is to uncover the (power-laden) structures that compel the various social actors in this interactional situation to pursue specific