

## Drawing on Bakhtin and Goffman: Toward an Epistemology that Makes Lived Experience Visible

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to enrich qualitative analysis by way of showing how Erving GOFFMAN's work can be enhanced by interfacing it with Mikhail BAKHTIN. The goal is to inspire an approach to the interpretation of human action that highlights phenomenologically immediate experience, thereby enhancing current work. BAKHTIN's later work focused on the interpretation of such experience but it was left incomplete at the time of his death. Fortunately, this latter work is reminiscent of his early work on the interpretation of poetics. The article addresses BAKHTIN's discussion of content, form, and material in art and how this discussion can enlighten our epistemological praxis with persons. By way of a demonstration, our proposed approach is applied to an online interaction between the second author and an anonymous online gamer.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges associated with research involving humans is that it is not possible to apply a method to arrive at a reality independent of human action. In a debate stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, humans have been described as qualitatively different from natural physical phenomena because humans constitute the ontology that they experience (for an overview see

POLKINGHORNE, 1983, pp.27-57). Arguably, the task of research with humans is not so much about uncovering a reality independent of linguistic constructions as it is about understanding realities humans tacitly experience *as-if given*. Take, for instance, one who is raised in a religious tradition that involves the social constitution of particular situations (like night clubs) as seedy and lascivious. Such places are themselves experienced as being this way and any such suggestion to the contrary seems given to one as ludicrous. Rather than using methods to uncover an objective reality, we can approach the study of human action as an endeavor to interpret such *experiential* realities that are simply lived and obscured in their taken-for-granted quality. Such experientially immediate realities play a crucial role to humans and so the challenge of how to conceive of techniques that make such phenomenologically immediate experience more visible for research is an important one to address. For example: how do we go about lifting the religious experience of the nightclub up for discussion, revealing its role in the life of such a community? [1]

In an effort to address such experienced realities, Erving GOFFMAN (1959, 1961, 1963a, 1963b, 1969, 1974) inspires qualitative methods that are often set forth as alternative approaches to a natural-scientific "cookbook" approach that attempts to apply a "recipe" to produce objectively verified results (POLKINGHORNE, 1983, p.3). His approach often rejected the standardization inherent in natural-scientific approaches, but, even though he touched on experience, he still bypassed the *deeply* experiential character of such realities. In particular, it will be discussed how his work, and the analyses inspired by it, tends to treat these realities as resources that can be rhetorically manipulated. That is, GOFFMAN's theories and practices were symptomatic of a potential problem in qualitative research: the treatment of experiential realities as rhetorically controllable when their verisimilar objectivity is such that they cannot be so manipulated. We will discuss how such experiential realities have a compelling quality such that they cannot be changed on such whim and our concern is that treating them as such can result in missing their deeply compelling quality. The experience of the nightclub, for example, is not something that one can just change. Understanding such a participant would require apprehending this experiential depth. It is thereby possible to extend GOFFMAN's work by illustrating this bypass and how it could be rectified. In the broader scheme of qualitative research, this discussion can serve as an illustration of how experiential realities are so compelling that researchers cannot afford to treat them as rhetorical resources, lest researchers bypass these important phenomena. [2]

We turn to Mikhail BAKHTIN because he inspires an approach that both illuminates the potential to enhance GOFFMAN and provides a way to improve on qualitative methods. He has been described by HOLQUIST, an editor and translator of much of BAKHTIN's work, as "epistemic" (2002, p.15-17). It is this largely unexplored epistemic side of BAKHTIN that we explicate in this paper. This epistemic feature of BAKHTIN had roots in his early career where he drew on the phenomenology of Max SCHELER (1970 [1913]; see CRESSWELL & TEUCHER, 2011) to address the techniques that can be used to interpret *art*

(BAKHTIN 1990a [1979])<sup>1</sup>. Such early work on aesthetics revolved around interpreting socially constituted lived realities as they are expressed in art and so speaks to contemporary movements that draw on aesthetics beyond the realm of art to address the fundamental structure of human-constituted reality (c.f. WELSCH, 1997, pp.4-8, 48, 90-98). BAKHTIN's epistemology in regards to art was about making visible experiential realities (CRESSWELL & BAERVELDT, 2011). His later work drew on similar ideas but focused directly on the interpretation of *human action* (BAKHTIN, 1986a [1979]). Taking this early and later work together enables a view into his epistemology that makes visible lived realities. We will outline GOFFMAN's claims insofar as they overlap with BAKHTIN and show how points of non-coincidence illustrate the potential to enrich the former's work, shortcomings illustrative of the way that qualitative research in general can be enriched. [3]

After providing a brief orientation to the ideas of GOFFMAN and BAKHTIN, we outline a BAKHTIN-inspired epistemology. By articulating this epistemology through a discussion of BAKHTIN's early work, we can distill four principles that make visible the experienced realities that people take for granted. Each of these principles will be illustrated with an interpretation of the lived experiential reality of an on-line interaction that contrasts the results to those that would emerge from a GOFFMAN-inspired analysis. By discussing these principles in light of Erving GOFFMAN the proposal herein attempts to clarify how taken-for-granted realities that constitute experiences cannot be used rhetorically—mostly because they are deep part of how reality is experienced as-if given. [4]

## 2. Orientation: GOFFMAN and BAKHTIN

### 2.1 GOFFMAN and frame analysis

A point where BAKHTIN and GOFFMAN interface is on their use of aesthetics. GOFFMAN drew on aesthetics with analogies to a theatrical performance, considering actions "a lay dramatist's scenario employing himself as a character" (1974, p.558; 1959). One of the major components of action was a *setting*. Much like in a play, the setting gives cues as to what kind of action should take place. In short, interactions among people involve generic sets of scripts of actions (1959, 1997, p.168) that regulate public behavior (1963a, p.8). Such normative expectations amount to a setting and these expectations are picked up by actors when they come upon a situation. [5]

This perspective is sophisticated insofar as a setting enables a *frame* through which people see the world and the world they see is apprehended as real even though it may be socially constituted (e.g. 1997, p.231). While GOFFMAN wrote that people do not create a frame or setting because they, in contrast, assess it correctly, he did not mean that frames and settings are apart from human action. Settings themselves are also created and situated in on-going activity as people

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1 Because much of BAKHTIN's work was not published until long after it was written, early work was actually published later. See Appendix in BRANDIST, SHEPHERD and TIHANOV (2004), for details regarding composition and publication dates.

create them as a part of what they do (1997, pp.150 and 162). In regards to frames, GOFFMAN wrote that "the individual in our society is effective in his [sic.] use of particular frameworks. The elements and the processes he assumes in his reading of the activity often *are* ones that the activity itself manifests" (1974, p.26, original emphasis). In this way, people act in accordance with the tacitly lived societal rules as to what should unfold (1997, p.155) and, all the while, constitute such rules in their action. This was how he approached lived realities. [6]

GOFFMAN only briefly addressed experience even though he drew on phenomenological approaches at times (e.g. 1961, pp.38, 55-62, 1974, pp.25, 31, 152, 1997, pp.151 and 195) and he tied experience to the notion of frames in the subtitle of the work concerning the analysis of frames: "Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience" (1974). This point of commonality makes his work compatible with BAKHTIN's. When he addressed performance of action, he addressed how it is often performed with emotion in order to be authentic. That is, the performer must affectively buy-in to his or her own performance such that they *feel* that they cannot do otherwise (e.g. 1959, p.2). The performance of a script involves the performer often personally believing in the frame to such a degree that it often involves the experience of the appropriate emotions. As such, his position was not likely one that takes emotion to be something that is entirely within a self-contained subject. His position was that emotional experience is bound to the setting and so invokes communal standards. In fact, he went so far as to claim that being a person involved enacting emotions, which are socially constituted (e.g. 1959, p.75). [7]

GOFFMAN's position, however, still effectively bypassed phenomenologically immediate experience. While there are points of resonance between BAKHTIN and GOFFMAN, there are differences that illustrate what the proposal herein can bring forward. A place where they differ is in the latter's lack of concern with phenomenologically immediate experience that we propose is part of lived realities. His work involved the adoption of a frame and the suppression of self-expression (e.g. 1961, p.19) and he so drew a distinction between an individual and a social setting. He also addressed the issue of pretense and its relation to such experience when he addressed misrepresentation (e.g. 1959, pp.58-66) for the purposes of rhetorically succeeding in the execution of a script. The emotional performance of a frame and the way of seeing reality in a way that it stipulates boils down to the individual *using* these socially available *resources* as a convincingly authentic performance; not treating such experiences as constitutive of realities as-if given such that one cannot just use them in this manner. His work does not go so far as to address the phenomenologically immediate experience that we propose to be important in qualitative research. [8]

The following discussion of BAKHTIN highlights differences that lead to a crucial point of distinction: phenomenologically immediate experiences entail perspectives that cannot be picked up and dropped as easily as GOFFMAN asserts. They are too deeply entwined with experiential realities to be simply rhetorically employed and, by pointing this out, we can enhance qualitative approaches in general. [9]

## 2.2 BAKHTIN and epistemology

BAKHTIN took up the problem of interpreting human action in a series of notes entitled *Toward a Methodology in the Human Sciences*. There, he was working towards interpretive techniques for understanding human action. For example, in a later work he wrote in note form:

"Understanding. This dismemberment of understanding into individual acts. In actual, real concrete understanding these acts merge inseparably into a unified process, but each act has an ideal semantic (*content-filled*) independence that can be singled out from the concrete empirical act. ... The *content* of a true symbol, through mediated semantic coupling, is correlated with the idea of worldwide wholeness" (BAKHTIN, 1986a [1979], pp.159-160, emphasis added). [10]

Accordingly, BAKHTIN wrote that it is possible to distill understanding of action by examining concrete doings. It involves making visible the "content" of the act. As the paper progresses, it will address how content involves realities tacitly lived by communities that include phenomenologically immediate experience. [11]

Before moving on to this point, however, there is an important issue to note. The above quote illustrates that the task of interpreting human action is a hermeneutic one as opposed to a natural-scientific one and so he falls in step with other efforts influenced by hermeneutics and phenomenology (e.g. VAN MANEN, 1990). When he wrote about "worldwide wholeness," we propose that this later work was drawing on the part-whole dialectic that marks hermeneutics (BAKHTIN 1986b [1979], p.145). What he likely meant by such "wholeness" can be seen in later writings where he wrote comments such as:

"Each text presupposes a generally understood (that is, conventional within a collective) system of signs, a language (if only the language of art). If there is no language behind the text, it is not a text, but a natural (not signifying) phenomenon, for example, a complex of natural cries and moans devoid of any linguistic (signifying repeatability). ... And so behind each text stands a *language system*. Everything in the text that is repeated and reproduced, everything repeatable and reproducible, *everything that can be given outside a given text* (the given) conforms to this language system. But at the same time each text (as an utterance) is individual, unique, and unrepeatable ..." (1986c [1979], p.105; emphasis added). [12]

Each utterance is bound to wider *language systems*. To express an utterance is to invoke the whole background of communal practices insofar as an utterance carries with it the repertoire of expressions used in a community. For example, to speak in the jargon of a professional community, using an acronym that they use, involves background experience and technical jargon in which the acronym is situated. It is situated in this background language system in the way that the acronym involves other unexpressed terms and web of discourse in which it is situated. It is our intention to eventually illuminate how this language system involves a broad notion of language that includes socio-linguistically constituted *embodied* experiences that constitute lived realities. When we refer to language

systems in this paper, we are referring to language in this rich sense that involves discursive webs of meaning that include embodied experience. [13]

Such hermeneutic overtones, moreover, also indicate that BAKHTIN did not consider such wholeness to be constituted by the sum of its parts. For example, the jargon used by the professional community would be uniquely expressed in the event of the utterance and so the background linguistic system would shift and change over time. BAKHTIN thereby expressed the hermeneutic claim that the interpretation of human life should not fall into reductionism because the whole of a language system cannot be analytically reduced to component parts of a machine. He was thereby writing that the subject matter is not thing-like in the way that a component of a machine must be. For within the natural-scientific mode

"there is only a *voiceless thing*. Any object of knowledge (including man) can be perceived and cognized as a thing. But a subject as such cannot be perceived and studied as a thing, for as a subject it cannot, while remaining a subject, become voiceless, and, consequently, cognition of it can only be *dialogic*. ... The activity of one who acknowledges a voiceless thing and the activity of one who acknowledges another subject, that is, the *dialogic* activity of the acknowledger" (1986a [1979], p.161, original emphasis; see also p.159). [14]

We cannot interpret human action as a thing-like component because it "speaks" – it contributes to the whole rather than acting as a component of the machine that can be easily replaced when broken. The vision that we draw from BAKHTIN will be one that avoids reductionism by recognizing the active quality of the individual in relation to a whole language system. [15]

The problem is that BAKHTIN left little more than a promissory note in his later work. He did not fully flesh out his vision for the techniques of approaching such interpretive work and the texts we have been quoting from were in note form at the time of his death. That is, BAKHTIN did not specify techniques of systemic inquiry into human action and he only spelled out the outline of a tantalizing vision. For example, he wrote about the "dismemberment of understanding into individual acts"—effectively breaking up human action to look at the parts of the whole—but he did not specify much about how. He did not fully develop this hermeneutics in light of the phenomenology he pursued in his early work (1990a [1979], 1990b [1975]). As we have spelled out elsewhere, he worked within a phenomenological tradition that was interested in the lifeworld in terms of how embodied experience is constituted in language systems and thereby distinguished himself from the style of HUSSERL that allowed for a self-contained consciousness (CRESSWELL & TEUCHER, 2011). As such, his approach focused on embodiment and the irreducible socio-linguistic quality of phenomenologically immediate experience that he drew from Max SCHELER (1970 [1913])<sup>2</sup>. Language is deeply experiential in its constitution of lived realities and it is for this reason that we employ the notion of language systems in a way

2 We would like to note that we have noticed resemblances with Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY's work on embodiment (1962). A thorough treatment of the parallels between these two theorists is beyond the scope of this paper.

that includes the body. His notes gestured towards a return to this early phenomenology with citations of related theorists in the later "Towards a Methodology in the Human Sciences" (e.g. BAKHTIN, 1986a [1979], pp.161-162), but this association was not systematically spelled out. [16]

Our task is to spell out a mode of inquiry in line with this vision and one way to do this is to look to his early work on art where he was specific. Note that BAKHTIN was primarily writing about the interpretation of human action in his later work and not about the interpretation of art, which had occupied his early work (e.g. 1990a [1979], 1990b [1975]). It ostensibly looks like BAKHTIN was making a transition at the end of his life: a transition from interpreting art to human action. It is not the case that such a transition marks a shift from one domain of inquiry to another. BAKHTIN scholars have noted that he addressed human action in the same terms as art (e.g. MORSON & EMERSON, 1990, p.187) and that the discussion of art was a common mode of doing social science among Russian intelligentsia (e.g. EMERSON, 1997). In other places, BAKHTIN and colleagues that he worked with treated art as an expression of life bound up in an on-going flow of language (e.g. VOLOŠINOV, 1976 [1927]). For BAKHTIN, interpreting art was about interpreting life so his early and later work were, in many ways, a synonymous endeavor (see CRESSWELL, 2011; CRESSWELL & BAERVELDT, 2011). [17]

In "Towards a Methodology in the Human Sciences," BAKHTIN (1986a [1979], p.164; see Footnote 10 on p.171) referred to one of his earliest works that focuses on the task of interpreting poetics in his essay entitled "The Problem of Content, Form, and Material in Verbal Art" (1990b [1975]). In this early work, he was specific about the interpretation of art and claimed that phenomena outside art should be understood through an aesthetic approach (p.271). Much like Alfred SCHÜTZ (1967 [1932]), BAKHTIN also thought that phenomenology had insight for social science understanding. They differed, however, insofar as SCHÜTZ was reported to see art as a distinct suspension of everyday life (KNOBLAUCH, 1999) and it is not clear if BAKHTIN saw such a distinction. Moreover, SCHÜTZ remained more faithful to HUSSERL by retaining the support of a transcendental consciousness that BAKHTIN critiqued throughout his work (nevertheless, a systematic comparison of these theorists has not been done and such a project has merit). We can look at the way that he approached the interpretation of art and extend it back to the way that BAKHTIN would approach the interpretation of human action. Ultimately, we can work towards techniques for making visible language systems that constitute lived realities. [18]

BAKHTIN referred to the need to develop a "methodology" of aesthetic interpretation throughout "The Problem of Content, Form, and Material in Verbal Art" and explicitly sets about the task of meeting this need. He argued against the interpretation of art along the lines of what he referred to as "material aesthetics" and "linguistics" (1990b [1975]). That is, he took a stand against a potential approach to the interpretation of art that concerned itself almost exclusively with the formed material—that is, the manner in which the material aspects related to one another. He made the case that it is not possible to understand the meaning of

art solely by reducing a work to a set of relations among components (1990b [1975]). Hence, the use of language system does not refer to a static or abstracted system, but rather a mode of linguistically constituted *being* enacted by a community. Over the course of his discussion, he addressed three components of art: content, form, and material. We will discuss each of these notions as BAKHTIN addressed them, generalize the discussion to GOFFMAN-inspired research practice, and we will make use of an illustrative extract to illustrate how a dialogue between BAKHTIN and GOFFMAN can enrich the latter. [19]

### 3. Content

#### 3.1 BAKHTIN's discussion of content

We quoted BAKHTIN as writing about the "*content* of a true symbol" (1986a [1979], p.160) in his later work and thereby writing about the interpretation of the content of human action. This comment was an echo of his early work on art (1990b [1975]). He considered it important to attend to the content of a work of art in terms of what the aesthetic expression is about. He did not treat content as synonymous with *topic*, however, because he wrote that the content of poetics is not just a topical issue. He conceived content as referring to "any particular domain of a culture taken as a whole, whether it is cognition, ethics, or art ..." (1990b [1975], p.274). We have argued elsewhere how BAKHTIN treated art as expressive of a language system that involves the expression of a phenomenologically immediate experiential worldview shaped in the linguistic practices of a community (CRESSWELL & BAERVELDT, 2009, 2011; CRESSWELL & TEUCHER, 2011). That is, there is a case to be made that language, for BAKHTIN, is embodied and thereby constitutive of how humans shape the realities they experience. Interpretation of art involves interpreting it as an expression of an experience lived in a language system instead of a single individual's description. It is this notion that we propose is expressed with the phrase "domain of culture." BAKHTIN treated the interpretation of content in art to be an interpretation of the whole of a language system expressed in the art, as the notion of *content is synonymous with language system*. In order to flesh out this claim in more detail, we will explore what he likely meant by "cognition" and "ethics." [20]

BAKHTIN distinguished cognition from "psychology" by describing how the latter refers to the study of idiosyncratic mechanisms within the self-contained subject (1990a [1979], p.114). When he referred to psychology, he was often referring to physiological phenomena like nervous system responses, heart rate changes, and so on (this usage follows the phenomenological distinction made by the phenomenologist Max SCHELER between physiological happenings and embodied intentional experience; see POOLE (2001) and CRESSWELL and TEUCHER (2011). Cognition, for BAKHTIN, is not subjective self-contained phenomena or processing mechanisms, and we see this claim in the way that he referred to cognition as a "domain of culture" in the short quote above. Cognition is a socially embodied phenomenon in BAKHTIN's view. In keeping with the phenomenology of his early work, it is a linguistically constituted mode of



experiencing the world that was so experientially pervasive that he described how cognition finds "nothing to be on hand ... beyond it" (1990b [1975], p.276). Cognition was BAKHTIN's way of addressing what is taken as true by an individual and, although it is constituted in a language system, it is experienced as true with irreducible verisimilar objectivity. Hence, the interpretation of art partly involves interpreting what is tacitly lived as true by those who live a language system. To do this in praxis means to look at the work of art and ask what is taken for granted in the background language system. [21]

BAKHTIN also wrote that interpretation of content involves the examination of the "ethical" action. A language system involves acting from within cognition that pertains to the present but also involves acting towards an "ought-to-be reality" (1990b [1975], p.278). Attending to ethical action involves interpreting the teleology of art in terms of what is taken for granted in terms of what "ought-to-be" (of course, the direction may never be realized but it is nevertheless active in this directedness). Pragmatically apprehending the content of art also means to ask: What is being advanced here? [22]

Asking what is being taken for granted and what is being advanced is not an easy endeavor. To address it relies on alterity, as one from another language system may apprehend life differently. Being part of a language system different from what is expressed in the art enables one to apprehend the content that one does not take for granted. BAKHTIN's approach, however, did not involve just looking at the art from the outside and judging it according to outside standards. An important feature of his analysis is that interpreting content is not about discovering the core propositions of an isolated community:

"However, a domain of culture should not be thought of as some kind of spatial whole, possessing not only boundaries but an inner territory. It is located entirely upon its boundaries, boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features. ... Separated by abstraction from these boundaries, it loses the ground of its being and becomes vacuous, arrogant; it degenerates and dies" (1990b [1975], p.274). [23]

He also wrote: "a contemplator who does not experience the event but co-experiences it, for, without co-evaluating to some extent, one cannot contemplate an event as an *event* specifically" (p.282, original emphasis). Art thereby brings forward something of *us-in-relation-to* another and not a core *other* language system in its own right (for BAKHTIN, there would be no such core to be found because a language system only exists on its boundaries in relation to another). As such, he treated the interpretation of the content of a work of art to be the interpretation of a reactive or responsive voice: reacting and responding to the relationship between the lived realities expressed in the art and the lived realities of the audience. The interpretation of content leads to an apprehension of the relation between language systems and not information about one *or* the other. Hence, the interpretation of art involves a constant tension that destabilizes—making impossible the search for—core essential properties of a language system. In other words, interpretation of content is a *relative* endeavor neither

where what we learn about a language system neither involves core properties of an objectified other nor a wholly unified commune. [24]

An implication of the foregoing is that the whole of an aesthetic expression is not a complete expression of the life that the interpreter lives. There may be points of difference between the language systems pertaining to the contemplator and the aesthetic expression, but there are also points of resonance. There are parts of art that resonate with the life people live and these recede into the obscurity of the life that they take for granted. There are portions where they do not resonate with and they are foreign. As we move with aesthetic expression like moving through a poem, we move in and out of the familiarity of tacit livedness. At the points where we do not resonate with a poem, we are "outside" of it in the sense that we are not participating in the expression of language systems at the moment. We see this expressive quality of a poem as an outsider looking into a different language system and can see what is taken for granted. [25]

### **3.2 Implications for extending GOFFMAN**

We propose that the notions of setting and frame are partly analogous to ideas addressed above and so a common starting place enables a platform from which GOFFMAN can be enriched. The previous discussion addressed the taken-for-granted perspective on reality that people take as true with verisimilar objectivity. Like BAKHTIN, GOFFMAN proposed that people constitute realities, as they know them (1961, p.26, 1974, p.248). The setting and frames people live constitutes realities in such a way that they treat them as if they were objective (1959, p.70, 1974, p.288, 1997, p.231). The above discussion also addressed how an expression involved an ought-to-be component to it. Similar features are present in GOFFMAN's notions of setting and frame. That is, the settings and frames involve the tacit expectations as to how things *should* unfold and are analogous to the ethical moment of content (e.g. 1959, p.13). These expectations shape behavior and action including the directedness that they take (e.g. 1963a, p.8). [26]

Having established a common ground, it is now possible to move on and discuss interpretive principles that we can be drawn from BAKHTIN's discussion of the interpretation of art. It will be shown how the kind of work that emerges from GOFFMAN can be enriched and what pitfalls qualitative researchers can avoid more generally. [27]

#### **3.2.1 Interpretive Principle 1**

*The analysis of content refers to the interpretation of language systems, including their experiential quality.* Extending this principle to human action would involve looking to what is expressed by an individual as expressive of language systems that constitute experienced realities. What our research participants say and do as a matter of course could be examined as the expression of what is experienced an irreducibly true for the language systems that they participate in. Looking in such a manner involves asking: What is taken for granted in this

expression? Ostensibly, GOFFMAN (1974) engaged in a similar task with frame analysis when asking what people take for granted about the setting and the frame. Secondly, we must ask what sorts of *oughts* are expressed in the actions of our research participants. In GOFFMAN's consideration of performances he wrote: "Thus, when the individual presents himself before others, his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the *officially accredited values of the society*, more so, in fact, than does his behavior as a whole" (1959, p.35, emphasis added). Frame analysis involved examining the sorts of moral rules and obligations that people live. As intimated above, such commonalities enable a common starting place between GOFFMAN and the proposal herein. [28]

Consider these claims in light of an on-line interaction where participants chatted while playing a game<sup>3</sup>. Even in a realm where one cannot see actual living dynamic bodies, many of GOFFMAN'S analytic principles still come to play and there is precedence for doing such. For example, JONES (2004) drew upon GOFFMAN to research computer mediated communication and we concur with JONES' claim that GOFFMAN's principles can be extended to on-line interactions. The excerpt is demarcated by the date and time along with the character's name (Drewsilla) that the second author was identified by inside the virtual world at the time. The other interactant uses the name "treyy" on-line.

Time Point	Interlocutor	
[11:50]	Drewsilla	> treyy : what's up?
[11:51]	treyy	hey
[11:51]	Drewsilla	how's it going?
[11:52]	treyy	good hey wat do i do
[11:52]	Drewsilla	for what?
[11:53]	treyy	attack
[11:54]	Drewsilla	you click on the battlefield button ... then a person in the roster and hit either spar or battle
[11:55]	treyy	thanx
[11:56]	Drewsilla	do you play other mmorpg's <sup>4</sup> ?
[11:56]	treyy	Ywah
[11:56]	treyy	do u play outwar
[11:57]	Drewsilla	nope ... haven't heard of that one actually
[11:57]	Drewsilla	is it good?
[11:58]	treyy	its a good game

3 This excerpt comes from an unpublished ethnographic project concerned with understanding how a shared community can be found in Massive Multiplayer On-line Role Playing Games. All names are on-line names used by players. Actual names and identities, aside from the second author's, remained unknown.

4 Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games.

[11:59]	Drewsilla	what is it ... like sci-fi?
[11:59]	treyy	no
[12:00]	treyy	i dont know how to explane i t
[12:00]	treyy	but u shold play i t
[12:00]	Drewsilla	what then?
[12:00]	Drewsilla	sweet
[12:02]	Drewsilla	why is it good?
[12:04]	treyy	its just like this game u can start a crew and fight other ppl and u can fight bosses
[12:06]	treyy	so r u gona play
[12:07]	Drewsilla	i'll hafta look into it
[12:08]	Drewsilla	I gotta run ... I have class... thanks for chatting
[12:08]	treyy	k
[12:09]	Drewsilla	have a good one

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Table 1: On-line interaction during a period of play on (Tuesday November 3, 2009, 11:18 A.M.—12:13 P.M.) [29]

Consider the performance of the symbol "mmorpg" used in the conversation above (time point 11:56). Inside the language system it is understood that "mmorpg" is short for "massive(ly) multiplayer online role playing game." It is *obvious* to those who participate in the reality of online gaming what such a term means. It is directed towards on-going interaction by requiring treyy to respond: it *ought* to be responded to. This is a shared language system for that phrase understood by those in the same communication community. It involves a shared language system with lived oughts and taken-for-granted knowledge about what is obvious. Such rules, moreover, enable the interaction to make sense and they shape it as it is experienced by those involved. In this instance the setting was in the chatroom of the online game. Had such a conversation taken place outside a virtual realm for instance, "You click the battlefield button ..." it would be misplaced (time point 11:54). Consider also how the spelling is technically wrong but the setting allowed for this use of such symbols. Had it been otherwise, there would likely have been some sort of corrective in the form of an apology by one of the interactants or a point would have been made of it. The setting of the interaction was taken for granted as a background frame that the Drewsilla and treyy reconstitute in their interaction. [30]

BAKHTIN and GOFFMAN could seem to fall in step with one another so far. Our pause to ask about what is taken for granted and what is being advanced opens up symbols would otherwise be passed over in the flow of lived experience. The difference lies in what is revealed. GOFFMAN treated such symbols as a resource to draw upon where and agent stands separate from such a frame.

MMORPG and the phrases used in the interaction would, for him, be expressive of an array of available resources and the conversation continues because the interactants chose the frame that includes such words/phrases in order to best fit the setting. BAKHTIN, in contrast, illustrates how the language system involves community and so socialized personal experience to a greater degree than GOFFMAN. Instead of conceiving of the participants as isolated monads working at distant terminals drawing on rhetorical resources to get along, we can see how the participation in such language systems are instances of communal participation. They constitute language systems in such actions instead of merely re-performing it—meaning that the language systems are both generic and unique to the particular situation at the same time. This, as opposed to a comparatively static resource standing in reserve to be used, is what we propose to be tacitly lived and exposed in our interpretive inquiry. Our hope is that this illustration also makes visible our concern that there is danger of treating the realities obtained in research as such static resources—the nature of this danger will become even clearer below. [31]

### 3.2.2 Interpretive Principle 2

*The analysis of content is essential for understanding.* If we cease to attend to language systems, including their experiential quality, as they are expressed in an instance of art, we cease to recognize the wholes that stand in relation to particular instances. We would cease to apprehend the significance of what we are trying to understand because language systems that *enable* particular action to make sense would be bypassed. This principle could be extended to the interpretation of human action. Unless we attend to such backgrounds as they are expressed in talk, we miss the experiential realities that our participants live. That is, the realities that people cognitively know and ethically act towards involve linguistically constituted knowledge and action that is experientially compelled. Understanding includes apprehending this experiential dimension and such experience is thereby an epistemological imperative. [32]

As intimated above, GOFFMAN moves in this direction, but does not push phenomenologically immediate experience in the manner presented herein. Consider his address of the differences between social classes in the United States of America (1959). He proposed that the differing content of conversations between people of different classes can only be understood if a person is attending to the community from which those communicating belong. GOFFMAN wrote "This constitutes one way in which a performance is 'socialized,' molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (1959, pp.35-37). There is thereby a case to be made that he addresses something like a language system in the background. While not focusing on phenomenologically immediate compellingness of the world, moreover, he does address how such socialization involves personal experience. For example, he addressed how those observing a group as a bystander cannot just step in and participate because they "psychologically cannot" do so (1963a, p.157). He also addressed how the social roles that people perform require a "spontaneous involvement" (1961, p.41), where they are experientially caught up

in the role. It is precisely such experiences that we propose are important for qualitative research and seek to enrich GOFFMAN's work by pushing this dimension further. [33]

For example, those that do not participate in the gaming community would make little sense of the ranking system that exists. If the second author were to say to a non-gamer that she had a "w-l record" of "456-2," it would express limited meaning. Such meaning, however, has an experiential dimension. It is only through experiencing a win-loss record of 456-2 that one understands what that means and why one would feel compelled to share it. It also underpinned the reason for treyy seeking help from Drewsilla at time point 11:52: her obvious expertise with the strong win-loss record. In a gaming situation, furthermore, there is the possibility of clicking on someone's profile to see how well their character has performed in battles in the past. Often times, though, the button to look at the profile and the button to challenge someone to a fight are, according to the second author's field notes, *frighteningly* close to each other. The challenge is sometimes selected by accident. This part of the interaction highlights how, even in the online interaction, experience has a role. The immediate experience of accidentally selecting the option to fight instead of the one to view a profile is an accident that is immediately bound to an experiential awareness of the accident—such as making an expression or exclamation when it was done. [34]

The result, we propose, is an enriched understanding of the text that we are interpreting: partnering discursive performance with experience to make explicit tacitly lived activity. What become visible are the language systems in which treyy and Drewsilla's action is situated, but it is not something that can be understood as a resource separate from them. For us to understand it, we must experience the W-L record and the problems with the challenge button. Doing such entails understanding what is personally, albeit socially constituted, compelling for the participants. Included is the experience of the W-L record and the vicissitudes of the challenge button that are immediately experienced as-if given. Interpretation involves apprehending such experiential realities that are lived and not something necessarily separate to be rhetorically deployed. That is, having a sense of the language system is not enough if the experiential quality of it is neglected. Just as GOFFMAN's analysis can be enhanced by attending to this issue, so qualitative research in general can be enhanced. [35]

### 3.2.3 Interpretive Principle 3

*The interpretation of content is about the interpretation of relationships among language systems and not language systems in isolation.* This interpretive task stands in contrast to the practice of discovering something about a distinguishable other. We could examine relational phenomena between those who interpret the action and those who we observe. Consequently, we would never be examining core language systems that are unified and undisputed. The interpretive techniques would be about language systems in dynamic tension within themselves and in relation to one another. When we turn to the

interpretation of human action, we turn to a situation that involves such relativity and tensions. [36]

In GOFFMAN's analysis, there is a partially parallel claim that starts from his position that, to analyze anything, we must have some form of cultural or communal understanding of it. He wrote that it "seems that we can hardly glance at anything without applying a primary framework" (1974, p.38) and we propose that this claim applies to researchers who are doing interpretive work. As such, GOFFMAN would likely agree that we won't see the examined social artifact without our own content coming to play as part of the interpretation. Therefore, if one is to study or examine anything, it must be done with the knowledge that one is partly doing so from views cultivated in language systems within which one participates. What can be added to GOFFMAN is the element of tension between foreignness and resonance. When primary frameworks—or taken for granted cognitive and ethical purviews—are ruptured by something unexpected, such frameworks become less taken-for-granted. Hence, the potential to bracket out taken-for-granted content becomes possible. Points where language systems resonate are not visible but places where they do not resonate are the points where relative discovery happens. [37]

In the on-line excerpt trey brought up a game called "outwar" where Drewsilla admitted that she had not played the game and then asked trey to describe the game (time point 11:58). Trey wasn't sure how to classify it himself or herself: "i dont know how to explain it" (time point 12:00). The second author, who was playing Drewsilla, was new to the online gaming community. While she did resonate in regards to "mmorpg's," she did not resonate with "outwar." Consider also when Drewsilla made her excuses for leaving the game trey responded with "k" (time point 12:08), to which Drewsilla responded, "have a good one" (time point 12:09). There was no further response to this. Therefore, trey's response of "k," which is short and curt in the world of typed communication, followed by no further well wishing, enacts his unhappiness with the conversation ending so soon or was dissatisfied with the excuse given by Drewsilla for leaving—a surprise to the second author. [38]

GOFFMAN's work involved surpassing one's own frameworks to understand frames and settings as social structures with core properties. A researcher should discern her own frameworks and, in our instance, apprehend the above differences as discoveries about the gamer community. In contrast, BAKHTIN inspires us to draw attention to the irreducible relativity of such activities. Such discoveries pertain to the relations among gamers and researchers. MMORPG, outwar, and the surprising conclusion of the interaction are symbols that illuminate the limit of what is shared and unshared. The overlap and differences make visible the language systems in-relation-to one another such that core properties of each are never obtained. At the beginning of this project, such practices were foreign. We were able to see them as we discussed above by virtue of attending to such foreignness. It is precisely by points of resonance that any shared meaning was constituted, yet the tensions with foreignness revealed such tacit practices those players of such online games take for granted relative

to us. Instead of revealing something about the gamer community in which they are a participant, we apprehend tensions emerging in-relation-to one another. The dynamics and vicissitudes of their lived lives in relation to ours are brought into clearer light. Where GOFFMAN-inspired analysis could bypass these, so could qualitative work in general. That is, we are advocating that researchers become more personally, in the full sense of the term, engaged in the research project in order to make relative language systems visible. [39]

## 4. Material and Form

### 4.1 BAKHTIN's discussion of material and form

"Material" is another important issue in the interpretation of art for BAKHTIN and it involved the concrete specifics of the composition of a work of art: words, sounds, cadence, phonics, and so on. This material is *formed* together in the finished work of art, insofar as it is organized into an architectonic whole when sentences are created. While BAKHTIN noted the importance of the form of material and how material is dead without form, he nevertheless was concerned that one may never go beyond the sentence insofar as one could focus solely on the relation among elements of the sentence and neglected content (e.g. 1990b [1975], p.264). The inseparability of content from form and material was crucially important for BAKHTIN and so the concrete specifics of the expression of a language system are inseparably part of the system. [40]

This is not to say that BAKHTIN dismissed formed material in favor of language systems. He wrote that the interpretation of material is an important part of the interpretive activity but aesthetic activity cannot be reduced to material:

"The aesthetics of verbal art must not skip over linguistic language [i.e. material] either, but must utilize all the work of linguistics to understand, on the one hand, the *technique* of the poet's creation on the basis of a correct understanding of the place of material in artistic creation, and, on the other hand, the distinctiveness of the aesthetic object" (p.297, original emphasis). [41]

While we need to consider the formed material aspects of aesthetic expression, focusing solely upon formed material leads to interpreting the work in a way that is devoid of content—that is, devoid of language systems in their richness. The lived experiences entailed in language systems could be neglected and the particular aesthetic expression would be severed from life. [42]

Consider how BAKHTIN discussed the construction of a building as an example of the role of formed material in interpreting art:

"But all this technical work carried out by the artists and studied by [material] aesthetics (without which there would be no works of art) does not enter into the aesthetic object created by contemplation, that is, into aesthetic being as such, into the ultimate goal of creativity: all is removed at the moment of artistic apprehension, just as the scaffolding is removed when a building is completed" (p.295). [43]



Scaffolding surrounds a building and enables it to be built but when the building is finished, the scaffolding is not sufficient for appreciating the architecture of a building. We can pragmatically look at the material organization that was used to structure the art, but formed material in itself alone becomes mute when it comes to the interpretation of art. At the moment of engagement with a work of art, it is not the material that is solely important because it is its cognitive and ethical expression that is accomplished in the aesthetic expression of the material that matters. Consequently, the interpretation of form does not refer to just formed material, because it involves the expression of language systems into which such form extends. *Language systems and formed material are inseparable because content is bound to the form of art in order to find expression.* [44]

It is the irreducible relationship between the formed material and content that mattered and BAKHTIN referred to this relationship as the "architectonic form" of the aesthetic work (p.315). Mere organization does not *lead us*, but we are *lead* instead by the way in which the formed material and the content of our lives are bound together. Considering the architectonic structure of the material enables us apprehend the art as an expression of activity that we live, but lived experience is not separable from the style of expression. [45]

Moreover, in light of our previous discussion about the relativity of interpretation, the architectonic form of an artistic expression expresses the lived life of communities (content) in relation to one another. BAKHTIN wrote:

"I must experience form as my own activity, axiological relationship to *content*, in order to experience form aesthetically: in form and through form, I sing, recount, and depict; through form, I express my love, my affirmation, my acceptance. ... So long as we simply see or hear something, we do not yet apprehend artistic form; one must take what is seen or heard or pronounced and expression of one's own active, axiological relationship, one must *enter as a creator into what is seen, heard, or pronounced*, and in so doing overcome the material, extracreatively determine the character of the form, its thingness" (p.305, original emphasis). [46]

The architectonic form of art is an organization of material that expresses both the language systems known and lived by an author and the language systems known and lived by us who engage art. Such a claim is seen in BAKHTIN's comment that we must bring ourselves to bear in the interpretation of art. Thereby, formed material is a boundary phenomenon and the lived life of one interpreting art comes to bear upon the interpretive practice. We can come to see ourselves from an outside perspective when we look closely at how the work of art is shaped. Points of difference are revealed and it is at such points that we can see language systems in their concrete expression. [47]

## 4.2 Implications for extending GOFFMAN

In terms of the formal organization of material, there is a further analogy between BAKHTIN and GOFFMAN regarding the latter's discussion of dialogue.

GOFFMAN was concerned with material in terms of the concrete doing of people where he wrote: "Once initiated, these activities must find a palpable place in the ongoing world, and the ongoing world must find a palpable place for them" (1974, p.499). GOFFMAN wrote of dialogue and body-language as constituted by the communities and cultures that an individual belongs to. Take for instance the use of sarcasm. The words, "Yeah, right," on their own mean that a person concurs. If there are an *eye roll* and a *sardonic tone* then, "Yeah, right," becomes an expression that the person is ridiculing or not trusting of the person they are speaking to. The way something was said or shown is as important as the actual words being said. Consider how this comes to play in the following interpretive principle. [48]

### 4.2.1 Interpretive Principle 4

*In order to study language systems we must also study formed material.*

Language systems and architectonics are inseparable from each other in the act of understanding that takes place in interpretive activity. In art, language systems are expressed in material organization (form) such that the embodied expression is not separated from them. Such minutiae are irreducibly bound to the content of life. That is, interpreting human action involves attending to the concrete minutiae of what is done in both verbal and embodied stylistics inherent in language systems. Formed material and language systems are inseparable insofar as the form of talk is expressive of the language system and *vice versa*. That is, it involves attending to the manner in which people's expressions are stylized and how interaction is structured. GOFFMAN claimed that the way that a performance is given is important. For example, when he addressed frame analysis, he claimed that the way in which people converse illuminates the frames that they employ. Consequently, he urged micro-analysis of the details of conversation in order to make visible such frames (1997, p.236). [49]

In the case of our example, the second author found that she had to keep continually type and respond rather rapidly after a message had been sent. Had she not responded quickly it would have expressed that she was no longer interested in chatting online with the other. At some points there were multiple topics being brought up and answered out of order (examine time points 12:00 through 12:04). These mix-ups happen because, as one is typing, one is also directing virtual characters on screen. Therefore, the disorganization of the text shows that the person is multi-tasking and lends to the experience that is being shared by both players as they unscramble each other's messages while they play the game. That is, the form of the text is bound to the practices of communities and attending to it leads to dimensions of the on-line community that could otherwise sink into the obscurity of tacit lived-ness. [50]

How the proposed interpretation differs from GOFFMAN can be seen in the way that such structure and form would, on his view, be considered a resource for establishing a convincing performance. The emotional intonation and bodily style would be *tactics* that could be used to convince an audience that a performance is authentic and the frame genuine. To convincingly perform as a gamer, GOFFMAN would likely claim that the second author must strategically type like others. The interpretation proposed herein differs insofar as the form of expression is backgrounded in the language systems in such a way that they cannot be simply rhetorically applied. Typing in this manner is bound to the practices of the community and is compelled as one progressively becomes part of the community. Instead of duping someone into believing that she was authentic, the second author was gaining competence in an embodied style of the gamer community and feeling the compulsion to type in this manner. What is gained here is a sympathetic sense of how a language system is bound to action and more insight into what is at stake for our research participants and us, beyond the imperative to be merely convincing. Form is enlivened by the language system and exposing such tacitly lived experiences is what the proposal herein can offer to enrich GOFFMAN and, in so doing, qualitative research in general. That is, we are seeking to remind researchers that the analysis of the micro-minutiae of conversation is not merely rhetoric as it is bound to compellingly lived realities of our participants. [51]

## 5. Conclusion

The issue that this paper has attempted to address is how to conceive of techniques that make phenomenologically immediate experience of an on-line dialogue more visible for research. BAKHTIN's later work focused directly on the interpretation of *human action* but this work was left general and nonspecific at the time of his death so principles from his work on art were distilled in an attempt to fulfill our objective. After discussing BAKHTIN's epistemology, we discussed the role of attending to content—language systems—and formed material was central to the interpretation of art. Such attention makes visible the experienced realities that people take for granted and so we distilled principles for interpreting human action. By discussing these principles in light of Erving GOFFMAN the proposal herein attempted to clarify how the linguistic-communal backgrounds that constitute experiences cannot be used rhetorically—mostly because they are deep part of how reality is experienced as-if given. [52]

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