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**Erving Goffman: The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**

Erving Goffman's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, published in 1959, provides a detailed description and analysis of process and meaning in mundane interaction. Goffman, as a product of the Chicago School, writes from a symbolic interactionist perspective, emphasizing a qualitative analysis of the component parts of the interactive process. Through a microsociological analysis and focus on unconventional subject matter, Goffman explores the details of individual identity, group relations, the impact of environment, and the movement and interactive meaning of information. His perspective, though limited in scope, provides new insight into the nature of social interaction and the psychology of the individual.

Goffman employs a "dramaturgical approach" in his study, concerning himself with the mode of presentation employed by the actor and its meaning in the broader social context (1959, 240). Interaction is viewed as a "performance," shaped by environment and audience, constructed to provide others with "impressions" that are consonant with the desired goals of the actor (17). The performance exists regardless of the mental state of the individual, as persona is often imputed to the individual in spite of his or her lack of faith in -- or even ignorance of -- the performance. Goffman uses the example of the doctor who is forced to give a placebo to a patient, fully aware of its impotence, as a result of the desire of the patient for more extensive treatment (18). In this way, the individual develops identity or persona as a function of interaction with others, through an exchange of information that allows for more specific definitions of identity and behavior.

The process of establishing social identity, then, becomes closely allied to the concept of the "front," which is described as "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (22). The front acts as the a vehicle of standardization, allowing for others to understand the individual on the basis of projected character traits that have normative meanings. As a "collective representation," the front establishes proper "setting," "appearance," and "manner" for the social role assumed by the actor, uniting interactive behavior with the personal front (27). The actor, in order to present a compelling front, is forced to both fill the duties of the social role and communicate the activities and characteristics of the role to other people in a consistent manner.

This process, known as "dramatic realization" (30), is predicated upon the activities of "impression management," the control (or lack of control) and communication of information through the performance (208). In constructing a front, information about the actor is given off through a variety of communicative sources, all of which must be controlled to effectively convince the audience of the appropriateness of behavior and consonance with the role assumed. Believability, as a result, is constructed in terms of verbal signification, which is used by the actor to establish intent, and non-verbal signification, which is used by the audience to verify the honesty of statements made by the individual. Attempts are made to present an "idealized" version of the front, more consistent with the norms, mores, and laws of society than the behavior of the actor when not before an audience (35). Information dealing with aberrant behavior and belief is concealed from the audience in a process of "mystification," making prominent those characteristics that are socially sanctioned, legitimating both the social role of the individual and the framework to which the role belongs (67).

Goffman explores nature of group dynamics through a discussion of "teams" and the relationship between performance and audience. He uses the concept of the team to illustrate the work of a group of individuals who "co-operate" in performance, attempting to achieve goals sanctioned by the group (79). Co-operation may manifest itself as unanimity in demeanor and behavior or in the assumption of differing roles for each individual, determined by the desired intent in performance. Goffman refers to the "shill," a member of the team who "provides a visible model for the audience of the kind of response the performers are seeking," promoting psychological excitement for the realization of a (generally monetary) goal, as an example of a "discrepant role" in the team (146). In each circumstance, the individual assumes a front that is perceived to enhance the group's performance.

The necessity of each individual to maintain his or her front in order to promote the team performance reduces the possibility of dissent. While the unifying elements of the team are often shallower and less complete than the requirements of performance, the individual actor feels a strong pressure to conform to the desired front in the presence of an audience, as deviance destroys the credibility of the entire performance. As a result, disagreement is carried out in the absence of an audience, where ideological and performance changes may be made without the threat of damage to the goals of the team, as well as the character of the individual. In this way, a clear division is made between team and audience.

Goffman describes the division between team performance and audience in terms of "region," describing the role of setting in the differentiation of actions taken by individuals (107). Extending the dramaturgical analysis, he divides region into "front," "back," and "outside" the stage, contingent upon the relationship of the audience to the performance. While the "official stance" of the team is visible in their frontstage presentation, in the backstage, "the impression fostered by the presentation is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course," indicating a more "truthful" type of performance (112). In the backstage, the conflict and difference inherent to familiarity is more fully explored, often evolving into a secondary type of presentation, contingent upon the absence of the responsibilities of the team presentation. To be outside the stage involves the inability to gain access to the performance of the team, described as an "audience segregation" in which specific performances are given to specific audiences, allowing the team to contrive the proper front for the demands of each audience (137). This allows the team, individual actor, and audience to preserve proper relationships in interaction and the establishments to which the interactions belong.

*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, though detailed, does not provide a comprehensive description of interactive processes. In exploring the construction of presentation among individual and teams, Goffman does not fully explore the nature of marginalized individuals, the importance of ritual or ceremony in the dramaturgy, or the construction of character. A reading of these complementary notions from Goffman's later work, including *Stigma* and *Interaction Ritual*, provides a vehicle for expanding the analysis of the interaction of everyday life into the broader experiences of human interaction.

The pressure of idealized conduct is most clearly seen in marginalized people, whose deviance forces them into "discredited" or "discreditable" groups, based on the nature of their stigma (Goffman 1963, 42). The importance of impression management is most visible with these individuals, as those who are discredited must assuage the tension their stigma causes in order to successfully interact with others, while those suffering from a discrediting stigma are forced to limit the access of others to information about the stigma or assume the character of a discredited individual. The emphasis on idealized, normative identity and conduct limits the ability of the discredited individual to achieve full acceptance by the population that he or she is forced to assimilate into. For the discreditable individual who attempts to "pass" and employ "disidentifiers" to establish him/herself as "normal" (44), feelings of ambivalence and alienation emerge as a result of limited social intercourse. Ultimately, the existence of a stigma of any type, a part of the existence of a large segment of the population, changes the nature of impression management and, hence, interaction.

In his essay "Face Work," from *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman expands on the concept of the "line," originally employed in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, dealing with the definition of line in terms of ritualized, symbolic action (Goffman 1967, 4). Symbol, as with the three types of symbolic imagery described in *Stigma*, stigma symbols, prestige symbols, and disidentifiers (Goffman 1963, 43-44), assume a more abstract location in the communicative process, a reification of verbal cues. The face reflects the line imputed by others, regardless of cognizance of its existence, to the actor, based on the use of verbal and non-verbal symbols, either affirming or denying a social construct. In this way a means of locating the actor in the interactive process and the broader society, allowing Goffman to affirm George Herbert Mead's argument that identity is constructed through an understanding of the projection of the self to others.

The vehicle for the construction of the character and identity can be seen in Goffman's article "Where The Action Is." The emphasis on the movement between social spaces, similar to his discussion of audience segregation and the "presence of third parties" (42), underscores the importance of the recreation of the self in different environments. To fully define the self, Goffman argues, involves performance in voluntary, consequential action, which is not fully available in everyday life. As a result, individuals are drawn to activities that involve risk-taking, such as gambling and bullfighting. Ultimately, the experience of action may become more important than social perception in defining character. As Goffman states:

Although fateful enterprises are often respectable, there are many character contests and scenes of serious action that are not. Yet these are the occasions and places that show respect for the moral character. Not only in mountain ranges that invite the climber, but also in casinos, pool halls, and racetracks do we find worship; it may be in churches, where the guarantee is high that nothing will occur, that the moral sensibility is weak (268).

In this sense, Goffman depicts extraordinary circumstances as a means of developing the character central to the experience of everyday life. Through an investigation of his work in a broader context, the relationship between the forces that shape society and the individual becomes more clear.

While Goffman's symbolic interactionist orientation situates him well in developing an understanding of microsociological function, it provides only a cursory exploration of the larger institutions and processes of society. Despite this emphasis, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is a work that lends itself well to a macrosociological reading. By placing Goffman's work in the context of the writings of other thinkers, a beneficial link between the micro- and macro-structures of society becomes visible.

An important link may be made between Goffman and Durkheim may be made in an inquiry into the concept of "spontaneity." In *The Presentation of Self*, the importance of spontaneity emerges as an aspect of the performance, as the actor seeks to create a front that does not appear to be contrived. Spontaneity allows for the realization of the "true" self, an idealized type of interaction that allows the individual to realize a desired face. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim describes a macrosociological model of spontaneity, a "finely articulated organisation in which each social value...is appreciated at its true worth" (313). Durkheim, though primarily concerned with labor, describes a type of social interaction that, like Goffman's model, reaffirms the existing social environment through the notion of "truth." Each individual is bound to the contemporary social organization, while attempting to realize a sense of freedom in expressing truth.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony extends this relationship further, establishing an ephemeral unconscious acceptance of existing social institutions. Change in this state, for Gramsci, takes place via change in human consciousness:

Since present control is internalized in the minds and hearts of workers and peasants, a counter form of socialization, a counter form of self-identity, is required to overthrow that control (Gramsci).

Through changes in consciousness, hegemony forms an "moving equilibrium" (Hebdige 1979, 15) through an assimilation of the doctrinal bases of the culture through "common sense" (9). In light of Goffman's work, hegemony provides the definition of "idealized" performance and the pressure to correspond to established definition. As a representation of what Marx termed "the ideas of the ruling class" (Marx 1848, 172) hegemony provides the norms, mores, and laws to which stigma, line, face, and Durkheim's anomie can be applied. In this sense, hegemony provides a vital link between the macrostructure of social institutions and the microsociological phenomena of face-to-face interaction.

*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* provides penetrating insight into the nature of interpersonal interaction and the institutions to which interaction more strongly applies. Despite an unusual, anecdotal methodology, Goffman's work displays an uncommon analytical rigor in dealing with a comparatively unexplored area of social thought. Through an inquiry into the everyday life of humanity, the book provides a strong foundation for the understanding of microsociological phenomena, an understanding bolstered by an investigation of his other writings. By limiting his work to a dramaturgical study, however, Goffman eliminates the possibility of applying the activities of the mundane world to the larger social world, a problem that may be reconciled by examining concepts employed in the book through the work of macrotheorists.

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