

THE PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Erving Goffman

Report by Sergio Missana

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first historical meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (Robert Ezra Park)

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life provides a fascinating view of human behavior in social interactions. Using the metaphor of theatrical performance to describe the ways in which we present ourselves to others, it offers keen insights about mundane social situations – and does so with dry humor, casting an ironic light on the pretensions, simulations, and embarrassments of everyday life. First published in 1959, the basic patterns of behavior it describes are still very relevant today. Its dramaturgical approach ultimately stimulates the reader to question the traditional notion of “self.”

Introduction

When an individual enters the presence of others, says Goffman, the others usually seek to acquire information about him (or her) or to bring into play information they already possess about him. The individual conveys information in two forms: by means of the expression he *gives* (primarily verbal) and the expression he *gives off* (contextual, non-verbal, presumably unintentional communication). The individual will attempt to control the conduct of others, particularly their responsive treatment of him. This control is achieved by influencing the definition of the situation they are all part of – by expressing himself in such a way as to give the impression that will lead the others to act in accordance with his own plans. As the individual's actions attempt to influence the definition of the situation by presenting himself in a favorable light, the others might respond on two levels: one that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate (verbal) and another for which he seems to have little concern or control (expressions given off). Given the fact that the others might try to infer something about the more controllable aspects of behavior by means of the less controllable, the individual is likely to attempt to exploit this very possibility by manipulating the expressions he gives off. This kind of theatrical control by the individual sets the stage for a potentially infinite communicational game, a cycle of concealment and false revelations. Nonetheless, most interactions arrive at what Goffman calls a “working consensus.” The initial definition of an activity projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the cooperative activity that follows.

Performances

The term “performance” refers to the “activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (22). “Front” is 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, or standard expressive equipment, may be divided into “setting” (furniture, physical layout, décor, etc.) and “personal front” (gender, age, race, insignia of rank, clothing, size and looks, posture, speech patterns, body gestures, etc.). Goffman divides personal front into “appearance” (social status) and “manner” (role in the interaction). The information conveyed by the front is abstract and general. A large number of acts can be presented from behind a small number of fronts. Fronts become institutionalized, “collective representations,” and tend to be selected, not created.

While in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses her activity with signs that dramatically highlight and convey information that might otherwise remain obscure. If the individual’s activity is to become significant to others, some aspects of it must be expressively accentuated and others suppressed. In the case of some roles (e.g., professional athletes, surgeons, violinists) the dramatization of their work is not required because the acts necessary to complete their tasks vividly convey the qualities claimed by the performer. In other cases, the individual might need to divert some energy from her work in order to dramatize the character of their role. Activity oriented toward work-tasks will be converted into activity oriented toward communication. There is also a tendency for performers to offer their observers an idealized impression of themselves and the situation – an impression that agrees with the accepted values of society. If the individual is to give an impression of ideal standards during his performance, he must conceal actions inconsistent with this idealized version of himself and his product. These might include: secret pleasures, economies or profitable activity; errors corrected before the performance; presentation of a final product and concealment of any evidence of “dirty work”; concealment of hardships endured in the process of acquiring the role, etc. The performer also will tend to promote in the audience the belief that he is related to them in a more ideal way than is actually the case. He will foster the impression that the present routine performed is the only one or that there is something special and unique about it. In reference to this, Goffman quotes William James: “... We may practically say that he has as many social selves as there are distinct groups of persons about whose opinion he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups” (48). By a process of “audience segregation,” the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts are different from others for whom he plays a different part in a different setting.

Performers must maintain expressive control. They must avoid unintended gestures that might give an impression that contradicts the one fostered by their performance. Goffman mentions three of these instances: a performer may accidentally convey incapacity, impropriety, or disrespect by momentarily losing muscular control of himself (he might fall, yawn, make a slip of the tongue, etc.); a performer may act in such a way as to seem too much or too little concerned with the performance (he might appear nervous or self-conscious, giggle compulsively, etc.); his presentation may suffer from inadequate dramaturgical direction. Goffman suggests that the expressive coherence expected in certain performances requires a certain bureaucratization of the spirit and “points out a

crucial discrepancy between our all-too-human selves and our socialized selves” (56). Every interaction creates constraints that play upon the individual and transform his activities into performances. In general, the representation of an activity will vary in some degree with the activity itself and, therefore, inevitably misrepresent it.

In Anglo-Saxon culture, there seems to be a common sense model that distinguishes between two kinds of behavior: a real, sincere, honest performance; and a false one (e.g., the work of stage actors or con men). Goffman suggests that an honest performance is “less firmly connected with the solid world as one might first assume” (71) ... “because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing” (72). Socialization does not so much involve learning the specific details of a concrete part, but learning enough pieces of expression as to be able to fill almost any part when one is required to do so. In this sense, a position or social status is not a material thing to be possessed and displayed, but rather a series of patterns of appropriate conduct.

Teams

“Team” refers to a set of individuals who cooperate in staging a routine. The relationship between the members of a team has two basic components: there are bonds of reciprocal dependency – each member must rely on the good conduct or dramaturgical cooperation of the others, who have the power to disrupt the show – and of reciprocal familiarity – members are “in the know”; they are accomplices in the maintenance of a particular appearance, before which the front cannot be maintained. Every team is, in this sense, a secret society. A team should not be confused with an informal group or clique, which may or may not constitute a team. The team is a grouping not in relation to a social structure or organization, but rather in relation to interactions in which a given projected definition of a situation is maintained. The object of a performer is to sustain a particular definition of a situation, which represents a claim of what reality is. In the case of a team, this reality may be reduced to a thin party line, which might not be equally congenial to all members. This requires a “principle of unanimity.” Teammates are expected to wait for the official word before taking a stand, and this official word is expected to be available to the members of the team. Interaction can be seen as a dialogue between two teams. In such an interaction, one team acts as performer (the team that controls the setting and/or contributes the more activity to the interaction or plays the more dramatically prominent part) and the other as audience. These roles are interchangeable. Directors fulfill two important functions: bringing back into line any member of the teams whose performance becomes unsuitable, and allocating the parts of the performance and the personal front employed in each part. Goffman suggests that courts – situations where the set forms around one dominant figure that remains as the center of attention – are commonly found outside palaces. There are two contrasting types of power in a performance: dramatic and directive dominance. Sometimes the same performer holds both types of power. Often performers who have positions of visible leadership are mere figureheads, whose subordinates really direct the show. Individuals take roles as performers and must also devote some effort to non-dramaturgical concerns: the activity itself of which the performance offers an acceptable dramatization.

Regions and region behavior

A region is a “place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (106). According to Goffman, in Anglo-Saxon society performances tend to be given in highly bounded regions, which also include time boundaries. “Front region” is the place where a performance is given. The performance of an individual in a front region can be seen as an effort to give the impression that her activity maintains certain standards. These standards have to do with the way she treats the audience while engaged with them (politeness) and with the way she carries herself while in their visual or aural range, but not necessarily engaged in talk with them (decorum). One form of decorum in working environments is “make-work”: workers in certain establishments are not only required to produce a certain amount, but must also be ready to give the impression that they are working very hard at certain moments. Decorum also includes mode of dress, permissible sound levels, etc. The expressively accentuated aspects of an activity will appear in the front region, while those aspects that are suppressed tend to occur in a “back region” or backstage. Goffman defines the backstage as the “place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (112). Backstage, performers behave out of character and the vital secrets of the show are visible. Therefore, the passage between front and back region is kept closed to members of the audience. George Orwell’s description of a waiter provides an example of the moment when a performer crosses this border: “It is an instructive sight to see a waiter going into a hotel dining-room. As he passes the door a sudden change comes over him. The set of his shoulders alters; all the dirt and hurry and irritation are dropped in an instant. He glides over the carpet, with a solemn priest-like air...” (122) The front and backstage character of certain places is built into them in a material way. It is often expected that those who work backstage will achieve technical standards while those who work in the front region will achieve expressive standards. People “who make a good impression,” including desirable visual attributes, will be placed in front regions. Some places may function at some times as a front region and at others as backstage. In Western society, there tends to be one informal backstage style of behavior, and another more formal style for performances. Sometimes, when backstage, some people may feel compelled to act out of character in an informal manner that could be “more of a pose than the performance from which it was meant to provide a relaxation” (134). To his distinction of front and backstage, Goffman adds a third region: “the outside,” all places other than the two defined by a specific performance. Front region control is an important instrument of audience segregation. It is convenient for the performer to exclude persons from the audience who will see her in another inconsistent presentation, and to separate different audiences for the same routine. Intrusions are likely to result in embarrassment.

Discrepant roles

There are usually facts that could discredit or disrupt the fragile reality dramatized by a performance. Destructive information must be controlled. A team must attempt to keep its secrets secret. Goffman describes several types of secrets: “dark” secrets, facts about the team that it knows and conceals and which are incompatible with the image it maintains before the audience;

“strategic” secrets, kept from the audience in order to prevent it from adapting to future actions by the team; “inside” secrets, whose possession marks an individual as being a member of a team; “entrusted” secrets, available to outsiders (e.g., a lawyer); and “free” secrets, acquired by outsiders through discovery, involuntary disclosure, indiscreet admissions, retransmissions, etc. Apart from keeping secrets, information control involves maintaining congruence – during the performance – between function, information possessed, and regions of access. Performers are usually present in the front and back regions, the audience tends to be present only in the front region, and outsiders are excluded from both. However, additional vantage points may develop that complicate the relationship between function, information, and space. Some of these discrepant roles involve individuals brought into a social situation in a false guise. These include: the “informer,” who pretends to be a member of the team, is allowed backstage, and is able to acquire destructive information; the “shill,” who acts as if he were an ordinary member of the audience but is in fact in league with the performers; the “spotter,” an impostor in the audience who uses his apparent lack of sophistication in the interest of the audience, not the team (e.g., a company agent pretending to be a client before a salesperson); the “go-between or mediator,” who learns the secrets of two sides in an interaction and tends to give each side the impression that he is more loyal to them than to the others (e.g., arbitrators, agents); and the “non-person,” treated as someone who isn’t there (e.g., servants in some societies). There are additional discrepant roles involving people who are not present during the performance: “service specialists,” who contribute to the construction, repair and maintenance of the show their clients perform for other people (architects, designers, dentists, hair stylists, accountants, lawyers, researchers, etc.); “training specialists,” whose task is to teach the performers how to build up a desired impression; “confidants,” who know destructive secrets but typically remain outside the spaces of the performance; and “colleagues,” persons who perform the same routines before the same kinds of audiences but are not members of the same team.

Communication out of character

When two teams present themselves to each other, performers tend to stay in character. Underneath the working consensus, there is a flow of less obvious currents of communication. In almost every social interaction, discrepant sentiments are to be found. While a performer may act as if her response in a situation were spontaneous, and may even think that this is true, it is always possible for situations to arise in which she will convey to some persons present that the show is only a show. Goffman stresses that it should not be inferred that “these surreptitious communications are any more a reflection of the real reality than are the official communications with which they are inconsistent” (169). He mentions four instances of communication out of character: treatment of the absent, staging talk, team collusion, and realigning actions.

When members of a team go backstage, they usually derogate the audience. Verbally, individuals tend to be treated relatively well to their faces and relatively badly behind their backs. This contributes to maintain the solidarity of the team and helps compensate for the loss of self-respect that may occur when the audience is given an accommodative treatment. Performers sometimes play a

satire of their interaction with the audience; they may describe aspects of the routine in a cynical or purely technical way or may refer to members of the audience with overly familiar terms of address. This combination of distance and derogation stresses the in-group/out-group split. It has little to do with the “actual” feelings of the performers. When teammates are out of the presence of the audience, they also engage in talk about the staging of the performance. “Team collusion” means any communication that is carefully conveyed in such a way as to cause no threat to the illusion that is being fostered for the audience. Parents spelling in front of young children are an example of this. Also, in the “semi-illegal and high pressure fringes of our commercial life” (180), teammates often use an explicitly learned vocabulary to convey secret information that is crucial to the show performed. Informal staging cues are used to warn teammates that the audience has come into presence or that the coast is clear and relaxation of front is possible. “Derisive collusion” involves communications that confirm for the performer that he does not really agree with the working consensus – that the show is just a show, providing a private defense against the claims of the audience. Also, one member of a team might play his part for the secret amusement of his teammates; teammates may attempt to tease one another during the performance. “Realigning actions” constitute unofficial lines of communication between teams engaged in an official performance. This may be carried by innuendo, mimicked accents, well-placed jokes, significant pauses, veiled hints, expressive overtones, etc. Rules regarding this laxity are strict. By means of carefully ambiguous statements, a performer is able to discover, without dropping his defensive stand, whether or not it is safe to change the current definition of the situation. When individuals are unfamiliar with each other’s opinions and statuses, a feeling-out process occurs in which each one discloses his/her views and status a little at a time. The interaction of teams involves the taking of small liberties as a means of testing the ground for unexpected advantage. This occurs during courting, in hierarchical organizations, and also in convivial interaction among relative equals.

Goffman concludes: “Whatever it is that generates the human want for social contact and for companionship, the effect seems to take two forms: a need for an audience before to try out our vaunted selves, and a need for teammates with whom to enter into collusive intimacies and backstage relaxation” (206).

The arts of impression management

Several attributes are required of a performer for the work of successfully staging a character. The techniques of impression management are aimed at avoiding performance disruptions. These include: “unmeant gestures,” minor, inadvertent acts that convey inappropriate impressions; “inopportune intrusions,” when an outsider accidentally enters a region in which a performance is going on or when a member of the audience enters the backstage; “faux pas,” where a performer unthinkingly makes an intentional contribution that destroys the image projected by the team; and “creating a scene,” in which an individual’s actions threaten the working consensus. In order to prevent these incidents each performer must possess certain attributes and express these attributes correctly: defensive attributes and practices, protective practices, and tact regarding tact. There are three kinds of defensive attributes and practices: a) dramaturgical loyalty, achieved by developing strong

in-group solidarity by derogating the audience backstage and by changing audiences frequently; b) dramaturgical discipline, to do mostly with the management of one's face and voice: the performer must appear to be immersed in her actions in a spontaneous, non-calculating way, but at the same time must be affectively dissociated from her presentation in a way that allows her to cope with any dramaturgical contingencies that may arise; c) dramaturgical circumspection: performers must be prudent, adapting their performance to the information conditions under which it must be staged. The defensive techniques of impression management have a counterpart in the tactful tendency of the audience and outsiders to help the performers save their own show (protective practices). The back and front regions of a performance are controlled not only by performers, but also by others who exercise discretion. Audiences act tactfully because of an identification with the performance, or because of a desire to avoid a scene, or to ingratiate themselves with the performers for purposes of exploitation. If the audience is to employ tact on the performer's behalf, the performer must in turn make this assistance possible, exercising tact about the tact.

Conclusion

In his conclusions, Goffman stresses the fact that there are cultural differences in the arts of impression management. "Reports by Western travellers are filled with instances in which their dramaturgical sense was offended or surprised..." (244). According to Goffman, members of an Anglo-American culture tend to lead indoor social lives, interact in fixed settings, keep strangers out, give the performers some privacy to prepare their show, finish performances once they are set in motion, and are in general quite earnest about the commonly shared civic drama.

Underlying all social interaction there is a fundamental dialectic. When individuals enter the presence of others, they seek to discover the facts of the situation. It would be useful to know the innermost feelings and thoughts of those involved in a given interaction. Since this kind of information is rarely available, the individual tends to employ substitutes (cues, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc.) as predictive devices. Paradoxically, the more an individual is concerned with the reality of a situation, the more he must focus on appearances. The impressions that we give others tend to be treated as claims and implicitly made promises, and claims and promises tend to have a moral character. As performers, individuals are concerned with giving the impression that they live up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged. These standards are so numerous and pervasive that it can be said that individuals (as performers) live in a moral world. They are not concerned with the moral issue of realizing these standards, but with the issue of engineering a convincing impression that this is the case.

Goffman concludes by stressing that the very structure of the self can be seen in terms of the performances that it is involved in. "In our society, the character one performs and one's self are somewhat equated, and this self-as-character is usually seen as something housed within the body of its possessor, especially the upper parts thereof, being a nodule, somehow, in the psychobiology of personality" (252). Goffman sees the performed self as an

image rather than as a solid entity; the body of the performer provides a peg on which something manufactured in collaboration with others is hung for some time." A correctly staged and performed scene leads an audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited" (252-253).