

Erving Goffman

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A prominent aspect of sociology is the study between individuals and their interactive behavior in society. Specifically, one thing that is often observed is the different behaviors one chooses depending on the social setting they are surrounded by. A sociologist named Erving Goffman used social theory and symbolic interactionism as a tool in studying why individuals act differently depending on where, who, or what one may be doing. After being an interactionist and talking with individuals in different social settings, Goffman presented the idea of impression management. Impression management is the idea that the world's a stage and individuals are actors who wear masks. These masks are put on in order to be comfortable or present their best self in front of others they are interacting with. This essay will discuss who Erving Goffman was as well as his development of the concept dramaturgy.

Erving Goffman was born June 11, 1922 in Mannville, Canada and Died November 19 in 1982 at the age of 60 in Philadelphia, PA (Daniels, 2024). He came from a family of Ukrainian Jews that immigrated to Canada before he was born. He had both a mother and father growing up as well as one older sister. Goffman's father was a tailor who opened a very successful business when his family moved to Manitoba, Canada. Goffman later attended the University of Manitoba where he studied chemistry. However, he paused his studies and went to work in Ottawa, Canada where he became fascinated with the ideas of sociology. This fascination was caused by Goffman meeting the famous sociologist Dennis Wrong. After his conversations with Wrong, Goffman decided to pursue his bachelors in sociology at the University of Toronto. After falling in love with his major, he received his bachelor degree in sociology. Goffman then made the decision to continue his education and receive a masters degree in sociology at the University of Chicago in

the United States. This move was the start of him becoming one of the greatest American sociologists to exist.

Throughout his successful career, Goffman's main focus as a sociologist was to study why one acts the way they act in society and with others. During his research, Goffman used the symbolic interaction perspective. In other words, he identified how society establishes the meaning of certain objects, places or people, how they develop their views, and finally, how they communicate them through interactions. Through this research he developed the concept of dramaturgy. Dramaturgy is the idea that life is a constant performance and every individual has a set of masks that they use around different social settings (Joshi, 2022). These masks that Goffman describes are made to control and stage who an individual is. Furthermore, it is a premade personality that one puts on when surrounded by a specific group. This use of a mask is called personality impression. Meaning these masks are giving others the impression of who they want to see. Some may put on their mask to blend in, others may put on theirs to stand out; However, no matter what mask they are wearing, Goffman clarifies that it is still in fact a mask and never one's natural self. This is said because Goffman believed there was no “normal” personality and that individuals are constantly wearing a mask.

There are three different types of performances where individuals wear their masks. The first performance is set on the “front stage.” Front stage is when one is putting on the act for others that one wants society to view them as even if it is sometimes fake (UPSC, 2024). An example of this is a worker at a hotel lobby. The workers' job is to provide incredible customer service with a smile on their face even if it is forced. This mask is not how the individual acts on a daily but acts the way it is needed to succeed in their job. Overall, this stage is extremely fake and is more of a survival mask than a more relaxed and comfortable one.

The next performance of masks can be used in what Goffman describes as “backstage” Backstage is the one on one interactions with others such as your friends or colleagues (UPSC, 2024). This mask has the potential to be more relaxed depending on how close or comfortable you are in the social setting. An example of two different masks during a backstage performance would be how one acts in front of their parents compared to how they may act with their friend group. Although the individual is comfortable in both settings. Each of them have different individuals that you want to please with your personality. This type of set is where masks are intertwined and can get uncomfortable due to the complexity and possibility of two different social groups in one room.

The last stage is “off stage” This is when one is alone and perceiving themselves as who they want to be (Duke University, 2024). Many argue that this stage is not a place where one is wearing a mask; But as mentioned previously, Goffman believes one is always wearing a mask even if it is for themselves and their own self preservation or comfort. This mask changes the most because as one grows and changes as an individual through their lifetime, the mask is also changing to show who the individual wants to perceive themselves as. In today's time, this stage is often perceived as one being their “true self” or living in their “natural personality.” However, Goffman's concept exposes what one thought was their normal self is actually something created to impress themselves as an individual just as much as any other person.

I believe Goffman's theoretical concept of dramaturgy helps me understand society in a new perspective. This is shown through the idea that individuals wear masks to be perceived as something or someone they are not actually. However, I disagree with his idea that there is not one's true self or in other words there is no person without a mask on. An example of this would be one trying to find their friends in school. When going through any new school transition, all

anyone wants to do is fit in and be accepted. Girls will start acting, styling, and even talking differently than how they normally would. All of this is an example of putting on a mask to be perceived as someone who fits in. However under the makeup, clothes, and accessories, I do believe there is an individual soul with their own natural self and personality. This personality started when the individual was born and through life experiences, it grows and shifts but is always still one's natural self in the end.

Overall, Erving Goffman is an extremely successful Canadian-American Sociologist who developed the concept of dramaturgy using the symbolic interactionism theory. He explains that the concept of dramaturgy is that the world is one big performance and individuals are actors. This specific kind of acting is called impression management; Furthermore, it is the act that individuals wear masks to adapt to who one wants to be perceived as depending on their surroundings.

References

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