

MEANING IS NEGOTIATED THROUGH INTERACTION

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Imagine you are staying in a hotel and return to your room one evening to find a stranger undressed and sitting in the bed. What do you do? A likely first response would be to check your key and the door number to see if you have the wrong room. How the stranger reacts will also give you important cues about the situation. If the person immediately begins to scream, you will likely conclude that you definitely have the wrong room or some mistake has been made. However, what if the person were to wink at you and say, "Hi there, I've been waiting for you." This comment would likely lead to an entirely different scenario playing out in your head. As we've discussed in earlier sections of the book, your response will depend on how you interpret the situation, and in a situation that is ambiguous you will look for clues from the other person to figure out what is going on. Once you have decided what is going on, you will have a better idea of how to respond. Another way of looking at this is that once you know the scene, you'll have an idea of the social identities that are expected for that scene.

WHAT'S GOING ON? PROJECTING A DEFINITION OF THE SITUATION

For the socialized actor, most situations are not this ambiguous. When we enter a situation we immediately name it; we *define the situation*. Some sociologists call this "framing." Once we know the definition of the situation or the frame, we know the scene and what is likely to be expected of us and others. In other words, frames set into motion a series of related categories in our minds that include the appropriate scripts for feeling and acting. Part IV described the process by which we learn these social scripts and identities. In this section, the focus is on the ways in which people signal to another and *negotiate* the definition of the situation. Most social interaction goes so smoothly that we are not aware of the underlying work we are doing as social actors to create a meaningful situation.

This interaction work is obvious in the imaginary play of children who spend a great deal of time defining the situation and negotiating the appropriate roles. "Pretend you are a pirate

LIFE AS THEATER

"Life as theater" uses the metaphor of *performance* to explain interaction routines. Like any metaphor, it is not a complete description of social reality, but in many ways, our interactions with others do seem to resemble a theatrical performance.

The theater metaphor can be seen in the origins of the word *person*, which comes from the Latin *persona*, meaning a mask worn by actors. We behave differently (play different roles) in front of different people (audiences). We pick out clothing (a costume) that is consistent with the image we wish to project. We enlist the help of friends, caterers, and decorators (fellow actors and stage crew) to help us successfully "stage" a dinner for a friend, a birthday party for a relative, or a rush party for a sorority or fraternity. And if we need to adjust our clothing or wish to say something unflattering about one of our guests, we are careful to do so out of sight from others (backstage).

The presentation of ourselves to others is known as *dramaturgy*, and the use of the theatrical metaphor for analyzing human interaction is known as the *dramaturgical perspective*. Goffman is one of the most noted writers on this subject. In 1959, he published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this classic book, Goffman analyzes everyday "performances." He details the care people take in preparing and presenting their performances—that is, the manner in which people *manage* the impressions others form of them.

Why do people spend so much time and energy thinking about what they should say and how they should look? Some would say that we should simply "be ourselves" and that only those who are deceitful need to worry about managing their image. They would concede that con artists and the insincere have to be concerned about these issues, but what about good, decent people? In fact, however, even saints are concerned with the presentation of self. To tell us to simply "be" ourselves implies that who we are is easily, quickly, and accurately perceived by those with whom we interact. But if we have just met someone or will be interacting with someone for only a short length of time (for example, in a job interview), we certainly can't count on the person to see us as we see ourselves. Dramaturgy can be an issue even when we interact with people who have known us for some time. Who we are may not be obvious to others—most of us do not wear our personal characteristics and convictions tattooed onto our foreheads.

Private Minds, Public Identities: Impression Management

A simple but profound truth about human interaction is that minds are private. Our thoughts, desires, beliefs, and character cannot be directly perceived and evaluated by others. We are not a race of mind readers, and so we must depend on signs and gestures to comprehend one another. Recall the example of the border guard from the essay in Part II. The guard sizes people up and treats them according to their appearance. Therefore, it is in people's best interest to appear in a way that gets them treated as they wish. In this case, they want to appear "law-abiding."

The fact that minds are private doesn't mean that people are obligated to accurately display their thoughts and desires to others, but it does mean that even the most honest people must be concerned about how they come across to others. In Goffman's (1959) words,

Whether an honest performer wishes to convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings. (p. 66)

It is crucial to remember that *impression management* is something everyone does in everyday activities. To one degree or another, we all manage others' impressions of us in interactions. We have to "perform" or "project" our intentions and desires, because people can't read our minds.

Because minds are private, people typically behave so as to highlight important facts about themselves that might otherwise go unnoticed. Goffman calls this activity *dramatic realization*. For example, when you are in a job interview, you might describe in great detail a position of responsibility you held in the past. Or if you are in traffic court, you might point out the absence of any past traffic violations to the judge. This feature may be true about you, but you probably wouldn't bring it up as a way to impress a potential date. Instead, you might focus on highlighting your favorite music or activities. Dramatic realization is an attempt to make traits and characteristics "real" and noticeable that might otherwise go unnoticed. If these traits are not noticed, they don't exist as "real" aspects of the performance. It is up to the individual to bring them into play.

Goffman also makes the point that we often try to present ourselves in a favorable light, a process he calls *idealization*. We might simply accent those aspects about ourselves that are positive (for example, mentioning that you are on the varsity team but not mentioning that you have just lost your job), or we might engage in outright deception (saying you are on the varsity team when you are not).

People also have a general tendency to convey the impression that the role they are currently engaged in is their most important role. For example, when an individual walks into a store to buy an expensive suit, she will be interacting with a "salesperson." The salesperson may also be a parent, spouse, community volunteer, jogger, gardener, and so forth, but if that salesperson is good at the job, he will take part in the interaction as if serving customers is the only (or at least the most important) role in his life at that moment.

Before an interaction can proceed successfully, two actors must agree about the sort of situation they are in and the role each is to play. Is it a friendly chat between acquaintances, a seduction between lovers, or a coaching session between subordinate and supervisor? This process is referred to as *identity negotiation*. People in an interaction each project an identity, and their responses to each other indicate whether they accept the projected identity. For example, if you ask your boss how old she is and she doesn't acknowledge the question, she has chosen not to grant you the identity of "familiar acquaintance." When two people agree on the identities they are both going to play in an interaction, they have arrived at what Goffman refers to as a *working consensus*.

Public agreement on identities does not necessarily reflect the actor's *private* beliefs. People often have pleasant chats with coworkers they dislike. There are many possible reasons for doing this—to be polite, to prevent an awkward scene, to ensure good relations in the workplace, or perhaps to stay in the good graces of a person who controls resources that might be

needed sometime. Whatever the private reality might be, it is the public, socially agreed upon definition of the situation that will guide the interaction.

Once a public agreement has been reached (whether implicitly or explicitly), it carries the weight of a contract. The working consensus has a moral character to it. Each actor *feels as if* he or she has the right to be treated in a particular way by other actors. The actors also *feel as if* they have an obligation to behave in ways that are consistent with the presented identity. For example, in an interaction between a teacher and a student, the person who is in the role of the teacher expects certain behavior from the person who is the student; these behaviors include being treated respectfully, being treated as a status superior, being treated as an expert on the subject, and so on. At the same time, the person who has claimed the identity of teacher has numerous obligations or duties, such as competently carrying out the teacher's role, being respectful of students, knowing a great deal about the subject, and being able to convey that knowledge to students. The rights and duties associated with an identity that has been publicly accepted must be respected if the expected social order of the interaction is to continue. If a math teacher is unable to solve a problem in front of the class or if a student treats the teacher as a younger sibling, the interaction grinds to an uncomfortable halt.

In sum, interaction has two key elements—publicly defining (and presenting) a personal identity and defining what sort of situation the individual is in with others. There are many possible answers to the questions “Who am I?” “Who are you?” “What’s going on?” For successful interaction to occur, these definitions must be projected and negotiated by the participants. The participants jockey to claim identities and to define the situation in ways that will help them accomplish their personal goals. Once identities are established, they must be actively maintained.

Who Are We and What Are We Doing Here?

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him [*sic*] or to bring into play information already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. (Goffman, 1959, p. 1)

When they come together, people must actively strive to present a definition of the role they wish to play in the interactional moment and the definition of the situation as they see it. Failure to do so may lead to misunderstandings, embarrassment, and the breakdown of the interaction. In a study of gym trainers and their clients, Linda Van Leuven (2001) describes the different definitions that client and trainer may bring to the interaction. Clients sometimes define the situation as a personal friendship or even a romantic encounter. Accordingly, they may enter the situation prepared to act out the identity of “engaging flirt.” Trainers, who are aware of this propensity in some clients, develop strategies designed to let the client know immediately what they can expect of the situation—a “workout” and not an occasion to “visit” or to “flirt.” For instance, a trainer may grill a potential client about her or his commitment in advance. During the sessions, the trainer might carefully avoid eye contact so as to discourage conversation. These interactional strategies help to establish a frame around the situation and to signal to participants what the boundaries and expectations are.

Goffman notes that there are many skills required to bring off a reasonable interactional performance. Because interaction requires the ongoing cooperation of participants, it is vulnerable and can break down. A situation might be defined in an inappropriate way. Or the identities the participants claim might somehow be discredited (as when a math teacher cannot solve a problem in front of the class). In that case, the result is embarrassment.

From a dramaturgical perspective, embarrassment can be defined as a breakdown in a projected identity. It is striking to note how uncomfortable we are made by embarrassment and how hard we work to avoid it. Indeed, embarrassment makes us so uncomfortable that we usually cooperate to prevent or smooth over other people's embarrassing actions, even if they are strangers. We might look away when someone stumbles clumsily, pretend not to hear the fight the couple is having at a nearby table, or readily and eagerly accept other people's explanations for their unacceptable behavior. Engaging in cooperative support of each other's identities to avoid or repair embarrassment is called *tact*. The presence and prevalence of tact is an extraordinary thing. Humans apparently have a very deep commitment to support each other's identities, even the identities of strangers.

True, there are times when someone might react to an embarrassing moment without tact (or even have engineered the moment, if it involves a rival), but these instances stand out because they are exceptions. Practical jokes that make someone look foolish (that is, those that discredit someone's "face") would not be funny if they were not a deviation from the usual norm of tact.

The mutual obligation to avoid "scenes" and to be who we claim to be means that whenever a situation or identity is threatened, someone must repair the interaction. When the audience helps in the repair work, they are being *tactful*—but, of course, the person whose identity is threatened can also work to repair the interaction. Following behavior that threatens an identity, people usually can offer explanations or give an *account* of the actions.

Offering accounts after an inappropriate act does not guarantee that others will accept ("honor") the account. Not every explanation is acceptable. "I had car trouble" might be a reasonable excuse for failing to get to class on time, but not "Voices told me to come late today." And some explanations are acceptable in some situations but not in others. Burning the stew because "I was distracted by a phone call" is acceptable, but the same excuse would certainly not be honored as an explanation for why someone failed to show up for her wedding. What is judged to be an acceptable account varies from situation to situation. It can also vary tremendously from one culture to another.

Goffman emphasizes just how fragile and potentially disruptable interaction routines really are. His intent is not so much to present people as cynical and calculating as to draw our attention to the tricky interpersonal gymnastics required of social actors. What is remarkable—and Goffman's respectful awe is apparent in his voluminous writings—is that people somehow do manage to project mutually understood definitions of self and situation, despite all the things that could go wrong.

It's important to note that people *learn* acceptable definitions of identity and situation. Some of these learning processes are very explicit. For instance, business schools frequently hold "mock cocktail parties" in order to teach students how to network with clients. Informal social networking is an important factor in successful business encounters. For this reason,

business schools provide students with an opportunity to “try on” and practice performing social networking identities. Students learn tips such as “don’t have both hands full with drink and food, because you won’t be able to shake someone else’s hand” and “you have to appear eager but not like you’re a ‘social climber.’”

Whether one intends to project an identity of competent instructor, capable businesswoman, earnest priest, or intimidating thug, we all have to engage in impression management; we have to signal to others our definition of the situation and our intended position.

Negotiating a Working Consensus

The generative quality of social structure is observable in face-to-face encounters. Individuals bring different ideas, goals, and expectations to social encounters. As they strive to achieve a working definition of what is going on, they transcribe their private definitions, as well as their immediate feelings, into a form that they think others will understand and accept. In other words, people manage, despite many differences, to engage in meaningful, sustainable discourses. We all do this through continual negotiation.

The theatrical form most indicative of the generative, negotiated quality of interaction is improvisation. “Theater sports” is a form of entertainment in which the audience calls out a “frame” or “setting”—usually one involving some sort of controversy or misunderstanding—and the actors then improvise their roles within the parameters of the setting. The actors and audience share a general understanding of what the scene or setting consists of, but how it is played out is largely determined by each actor’s performance repertoire (that is, each actor’s familiarity with how people might react in this situation) and how the other performers respond. If you have participated in theater sports, you know that the fun is in seeing how diverse actors play off one another when they don’t know what the others are likely to do.

Everyday interaction is an ongoing series of such moments. The ability to negotiate working understandings of different situations is the genius of human sociability. The fact that everyday encounters feel more or less like comfortable routines—rather than a madcap scramble of miscues, misunderstandings, and maladies—is a testament to the existence of shared social scripts.