Challenging the Self: Erving Goffman’s Radical Self and Cultural Shift in the 1950s

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Introduction

The issue of identity has been increasing its importance in the field of humanities. In the disciplines such as literature, history, and cultural studies, more and more researchers now examine the complexity of the issue of identity that affects on the production of literary works and historical/cultural construction of reality. The basic assumption of identity among researchers in humanities is that the identity is not a given thing but an entity the individual can construct through numerous interactions with the others and social reality.

Erving Goffman is a pioneer who pushed the issue of identity toward a more nuanced, dynamic manner than his previous scholars had thought. Traditionally, the identity had been regarded as a static component each individual holds throughout their lives. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* published in 1959, Goffman presented how an individual manages his/her impression upon the others by employing the framework of social interaction. He argued that we interact with the others in order to give them favorable impressions by using several strategies. Presenting the self is thus a starting point of social construction for individuals in a society in which they live.

This was a challenging thesis. In the late 1950s the sociological community in America was dominated by functionalism that holds a priori assumptions about the existence of certain social systems and therefore puts societies and social systems over and above individuals. To put simply, for functionalists, the society controls the individual: for Goffman, the individual interacts with the society. In the late 1950s, Goffman’s view on the relationship between the society and individuals did not gain popularity among sociologists. But, gradually, the tide changed and in 1963 Peter Berger’s popular book *Invitation to Sociology: A Humanistic Perspective* presented a similar view on the society/individual relationship. Identity, wrote Berger, is “no longer a solid, given entity... it is rather a process, continuously created and re-created in each social situation that one enters, held together by the slender thread of memory.”

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Purpose of This Essay

This essay explains why Erving Goffman’s notion of the “self” he presented in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was a radical shift in the issue of identity. His radical “self” concept has been reviewed by many sociologists having different takes on this issue. For the moment, suffice to say that Goffman has been viewed variously as existentialist, structuralist, social interactionist, phenomenologist, micro-behaviorist, postmodernist, and so forth. Asking which Goffman is the true Goffman is a meaningless question. The important point is to recognize that his “self” concept challenged then-dominant functionalist view on society. Functionalism explains that each individual, as a component of society, contributes to maintaining a stable social whole. Even structural social conflicts present are seen as transient phenomena that will be eliminated due to a general social consensus on democratic values. Reflecting the modernist ideology, functionalism sets a common goal for the society and individuals constituting it.

Whereas functionalism begins its analysis from setting a common goal and holding the assumption that a society maintains its social equilibrium, Goffman examines the microcosm of individual’s everyday interactions, namely, meeting other persons, exchanging information about them, and giving and receiving a set of impression the individual and the others possess. Here Goffman is not so much concerned with social equilibrium or a common goal for the society although he admits that individuals cannot escape from already established social structures such as customs, stereotypes, social hierarchy, and cultural beliefs. An individual’s self is constructed through the interaction between the individual and the others, whose interactions construct a whole set of social structure, or social reality.

In addition to arguing that Goffman’s self was a radical shift in the field of sociology, this essay also relates Goffman’s “self” to the discipline of American history. Although Goffman’s study on the self was purely theoretical in the sociological sense, his radical treatment of the self can be appreciated not only in sociology but also in American history. In major works on American history, especially the works on race relations in American history, produced around the time Goffman published *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, historians had examined race relations between white and black Americans in a similar fashion functionalist sociologists did. They
analyzed race relations in American history from a fixed position that pays attention to how white Americans had constructed the relationship with black Americans. If we apply Goffman’s “self” conception to the historians’ methodological convention at that time, we will raise a question how black Americans have constructed their “self” identity against white Americans or the social structure that have discriminated them throughout the course of American history. This essay thus considers the implication how Goffman’s sociological theory can be applied to historical works such as race relation issues.

**Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life***

*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, based on his dissertation research in a small Scottish island, analyzed social establishments from the theatrical perspective and formulated how people impress themselves on the others through face-to-face interaction. In fact, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is full of theatrical metaphors — "performance," "front stage," "backstage," "setting," "roles," "appearance," "manner," and so forth. All these elements combined, Goffman calls human interactions the “drama.”

Goffman defines “performance” as “all 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.” The performer, to follow Goffman’s thought, acts before the audience (“a particular set of observers”) and gives some impression (“influence”) on the audience. The “act” and “impression” is the information the performer provides about him/herself, and the other (the audience) perceives the information to have a sense of the “performer.” Then, their roles change: the performer turns to the audience and the audience turns to be the performer.

This is Goffman’s framework about human interactions, into which he introduces several analytical devices. When one meets the other, he or she wants to know about the information of the other. In such a situation, Goffman argues, people try to acquire the information about the other by reading two kinds of sign activity the other does — the expression that he or she “gives” and “gives off.” The “gives” expression is conveyed mainly by verbal expressions. The “give off” expression is carried by non-verbal expressions which others can treat as symptomatic of the actor. “Give-off”
expressions include gesture, facial expression, cloths, hair, the way of glance, and so forth. They are considered more difficult to control than verbal expressions.

However, the other of course recognizes that non-verbal expressions are difficult to control: the other then tries to impress him/herself on the others by intentionally managing his non-verbal elements in the way in which his/her intentional management of non-verbal expressions cannot be seen as intentional. Goffman calls this kind of effort “impression management.”

As a matter of fact, the reality of social interaction is more complicated than a drama. In theater the other is always performer’s co-player or audience; in the real life the other can become a co-player, audience, or outsider, depending on the situation. The roles are always changing. One’s action influences the definition of the situation, with which the others may conflict. Goffman thinks of “working consensus” to avoid an open conflict in the interaction between performers. To Goffman, interaction is “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence.”5 Moreover, in theater this effort is carried out very intentionally and the audience accepts this intentional performance or the audience is supposed to accept this as they see it. In reality, on the other hand, this effort has to be done in a more deliberate way so that the audience cannot notice the performer’s intentionality.

Despite the difference, what connects between Goffman’s theater metaphor and social interactions in reality is one’s desire to impress oneself on the others in the way he or she wishes. Whether this impression management is done on the stage or in the reality, the performer demonstrates the intentionality of their impression management. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman discusses the way in which one, as a performer, impresses him/herself on the others in the way he wants others to think about him/herself. Goffman explains the nature of performance by introducing the concept of “front.” The “front” is the “expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unintentionally employed by the individual during his performance.” The front is official parts of society and those who control the front belong to higher societal class. As a part of performance, the front functions in a “general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance.”6

The front incorporates the “setting” that is a fixed sign-equipment. The setting is
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the “scenic parts of expressive equipment” and works as “background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it.” Furniture, décor, and physical layout are the examples of “setting.” Performance requires the setting; the setting controls the performance. For example, a bank teller performs as a bank teller at a bank because the bank is the setting for the performer/bank teller.

“Personal front” is another term to refer to the other means of expressive equipment, from which we can identify with the performer. For instance, insignia of office or rank, clothing, sex, age, race, size and looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, and bodily gestures are all the factors one can judge a particular person. By observing the personal front, we can expect the performer’s future action. Some of these expressions are very fixed (sex, race, and size, for example); the others are changeable and transitory (facial expression and bodily gestures, for example).

Personal front is made up with “appearance” and “manner.” The “appearance” functions to tell us “of the performer’s social statuses.” It is expectable because appearance is standardized within a culture. We can judge the performer’s social status from their appearance (for instance, cloths, food, car, house, etc.). The “manner” functions to “warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation.” By manner, we can expect that a meek person, for instance, will follow the lead of others. These two concepts may be contradictory, Goffman claims, but they have a consistency. The diversity of social status to some extent corresponds to the diversity in the indications that are made through an expected interaction.

“Social front” is another concept, contrasting to personal front. This is a “collective representation,” which tends to “become institutionalized in terms of the abstract stereotyped expectations to which it gives rise, and tends to take on a meaning and stability apart from the specific tasks which happen at the time to be performed in its name.” Goffman argues that the social front can be divided into “traditional parts” (the setting, appearance, and manner, as is the same as “personal front”) and the parts “that we may not find a perfect fit between the specific character of a performance and the general socialized guise in which it appears to us.”

Goffman moves onto the analysis of group dynamics. Calling it “team (performance team),” Goffman focuses on the elements a team consists of. In “any set
of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine,” he says, participants try to “maintain a particular definition of the situation.” A team is “a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained.” Goffman examines the relationship between performers, in other words, the role of each performer within a team. He employs “dramatic dominance” and “directive dominance” as two dimensions of team performance. Dramatic dominance means that the central figure plays a dominant role in a given situation. Directive dominance means that a leading figure creates a situation as he or she wants. Goffman is concerned with the relational performance in which the definition of situation is maintained, or the team is maintained.

The division between team performance and audience is “region (stage).” A region is created by performers. This is an attitude rather than the physical boundary. A region is, Goffman defines, “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception.” Regions vary according to which the region is bounded and according to the media of communication in which the barriers to perception occur. Region is divided into “front region” and “back region (backstage).” Goffman pays his attention to “front region” — the place where the performance is given. Front region is the formal space at which performance is given. Front region is defined by conventions. The performance in the front region requires two kinds of standards — “politeness” and “decorum.” Politeness requires “the way in which the performer treats the audience while engaged in talk with them or in gestual interchanges that area substitutes for talk.” Decorum requires “the way in which the performer comports himself while in visual or aural range of the audience but not necessarily engaged in talk with them.” For the former, “manner” becomes important; for the latter, “appearance” becomes important. Decorum is divided into “moral requirement” and “instrumental requirement.” Moral requirement are “ends in themselves and presumably refer to rules regarding non-interference and non-molestation of others, rules regarding sexual propriety, rules regarding respect for sacred places, etc.” Instrumental requirement are “not ends in themselves and presumably refer to duties such as an employer might demand of his employees — care of property, maintenance of work levels, etc.”

In the “back region (backstage),” performers display the suppressive facts that
they cannot make an appearance at the front region. The performance at back region therefore shows contradiction to that at the front region. It is a “place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course.”17 Audience cannot see what is going on at the back stage. The control of back region has to do with the performance at the front stage because individuals attempt to cushion themselves from the demands required at the front stage. In actual situations, Goffman says, we always compromise between the formal styles at the front stage and informal ones at the back stage.

In the conclusion of The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Goffman examines the way in which a performer protects him/herself from collapsing his/her impression management. He proposes the three important capacities to perform in safety: “dramaturgical loyalty” (the defensive measures used by performers to save their own show); “dramaturgical discipline” (the protective measures used by audience and outsiders to assist the performers in saving the performer’s show); and “dramaturgical circumspection.” 18

Situating the Self in Sociology and History of America

Before Goffman, the concept of “self” as an entity that is more than subjectivity had already been richly developed in America. Back in the late nineteenth century, psychologist William James was a pioneer to initiate this more-than-subjectivity self school. In The Principles of Psychology (1890), James argued that the self was composed of four elements: the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the pure ego. Before James, philosophers had thought that the self was almost synonymous with soul or spirit. The innovative point of James’s notion of the self is that he included external elements surrounding the individual to consider the self. For instance, the car and house are the components of the self as “the material self.” His reputation or occupation also constitutes his self as “the social self.”

In the early twentieth century Charles Cooley presented the “looking-glass self” concept, by which he meant that the self is mirrored and reflected through others. We perceive, Cooley wrote, “in another’s mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it.” 19 Cooley conceived a simple reflective relationship between the one and the other(s). Although
this concept is still valid, the reality in which such reflection takes place is significantly complex.

In the 1930s, George Herbert Mead presented the notion of self in a more elaborate way. Mead distinguished “Me” from “I.” “I” is subjective, inner, and spontaneous: “Me” is organized attitudes of others and connects the person to the society. “I,” which responds, as an individual, to the definition of the situation, is over against the “Me.” According to Mead, the self plays both subjectively (as “I”) and objectively (as “Me”). Through the interaction between “I” and “Me” in a social setting, Mead argued, the self identity is constructed. Mead introduced the term “communication,” as a means by which the self is constructed, that provides a “form of behavior in which the organism or the individual may become an object to himself.”

As I have mentioned in the introduction section, Goffman is often regarded as one of the successors to symbolic interactionism. This is probably because Goffman was trained by symbolic interactionists like Everett Hughes and Herbert Blumer at the University of Chicago. Symbolic interactionists define the “self” as being constructed through the social interaction. Goffman’s “self” seems to be a similar concept to the “self” symbolic interactionists think of. However, Goffman’s “self” is the apparatus to express his/herself in the pre-conditioned setting and each individual strives to impress oneself on the others in this given situation while symbolic interactionists neglected to take social structure, power, and history into consideration. Goffman’s employment of theatrical metaphor to analyze the human interaction in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life suggests that he considers social structure crucial factors. His theatrical framework provides the insight that human interactions are to a larger extent interlocked with social structure. Goffman first sets the stage, and then analyses the human interactions that are performed on that stage. Stage involves several social and cultural enforcements that performers are supposed to follow.

Without a question, Goffman’s formulation of the self presentation is theoretical and sociological, but it is indicative of understanding historical works produced in the 1950s and thereafter. Of course sociology and history are different disciplines and their objectives differ from each other. To borrow Max Weber’s explanation, sociology formulates type concepts and generalized uniformalities of empirical process and thus necessarily an abstract study, lacking concrete content. History, on the other hand, says
Weber, explains individual actions, structures, and personalities that possess cultural importance.\textsuperscript{22}

Despite the disciplinary difference, Goffman’s work can be understood as a critique of historical works, as well as that of then-dominating “grand theory” sociology. In retrospect, major historical works on race relationship produced even in the 1960s and 1970s failed to consider the interactive nature of race relationship. Historians described race relationships observed in several historical events from the white-side perspective, which was possible by depicting African Americans as static, fixed entity.\textsuperscript{23}

Goffman’s conception of the self resonates with the issue of agency in history. Especially relevant is its application to majority/minority relationships like the white/black relationship in American history. Agency, in the context of African Americans’ identity construction against the white supremacy, means their day-to-day resistance within the social institution. Goffman’s distinctiveness is that he considered “presenting the self” a performance. In history and cultural studies, scholars treat the self, identity, or self identity, as an active agent to actively responses to the surroundings. Goffman’s use of the term “performance” resonates with the way scholars in humanities use “agency” in that they understand the self as an active agent.

Opposing to determinism or structuralism, the agency approach involves dynamism in relationship between groups. The quotation below well represents the similarity between Goffman’s conception of self and historical agency.

While this image [of an individual created by its performer] is entertained concerning [original italic] the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses.... The self, then, \textit{as a performed character, is not an organic thing} [my italic] 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.\textsuperscript{24}

Thus, Goffman defines the “self” as the instrument to create and manage impression of
oneself in front of the others. The Goffman’s self is something that is always changing according to the setting as historical agencies are always being shaped according to transforming eternal conditions.25

Conclusion

It is safe to say that Goffman’s Presentation of Self in Everyday Life is a welcome addition to the literature of the self as a multilayered entity since William James. But Goffman’s special significance becomes clear when we place him in the context of the 1950s and 1960s. At that time functionalism dominated the sociological community. The consensus among sociologists was that individuals were highly socialized and shared the dominant values. In postwar America when the nation enjoyed affluence and exerted its political/economical/cultural power over the world, sociologists and intellectuals alike believed that structural social conflicts had been largely eliminated or were of a transient nature thanks to the democratic values. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life was published in 1959, on the eve of one of the most tumultuous decades of American history. Goffman’s “self” was not a kind of self that would play the same roles played in the past. Goffman’s self combines previously distinct performances with styles of interaction. Goffman’s radical self moves, for example, cultural signs in the “backstage (back region)” such as sexual code, language code, and dress code, to the “front stage,” where performers openly act using these codes that had not been played in public.26

At the same time, the conception of self Goffman presented in the late 1950s was a precursor of identity studies, or postmodernism in a broader sense. The self is always in the process of being shaped and reshaped by the complexity of social structures, but the self, as an active agent, can control its own subjectivity to the extent that it can manage its impression on others. Historians have examined the issue of identity to describe historical events especially in the field of race relationships. Here we see that sociology and history meet each other with the similar concern with the self, identity, or agency. It is worth noting that it was in 1959, the same year Goffman published The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, the iconoclastic sociologist Charles Wright Mills published Sociological Imagination, the harsh attack on Talcott Parson’s functionalist approach. In this book Mills proposed to incorporate historical approaches into sociology.
for the sociology that can reflect the reality, rather than producing abstract empiricism. Discussing Goffman's radical approach to the self and the issue of historical agency in race relationships, we come to realize that individuals' actions make the social reality and historical reality within social structures. Goffman was a forerunner of the identity construction approach and he presented this view as early as in the late 1950s.

2 “Self” and “identity” are interchangeable in this essay. In his 1963 book *Stigma*, Goffman changed his terminology from “the self” to “identity.”
5 Ibid., 15.
6 Ibid., 22.
7 Ibid., 22-23.
8 Ibid., 23-24
9 Ibid., 24.
10 Ibid., 29.
11 Ibid., 91.
12 Ibid., 104.
13 Ibid., 106.
14 Ibid., 107.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 107-108.
17 Ibid., 112.
18 Ibid., 238-255.


21 Social Theory, 224-229.


24 Social Theory, 252-253.
