The Self and Social Interaction

Understanding the Presentation of Self in Interaction
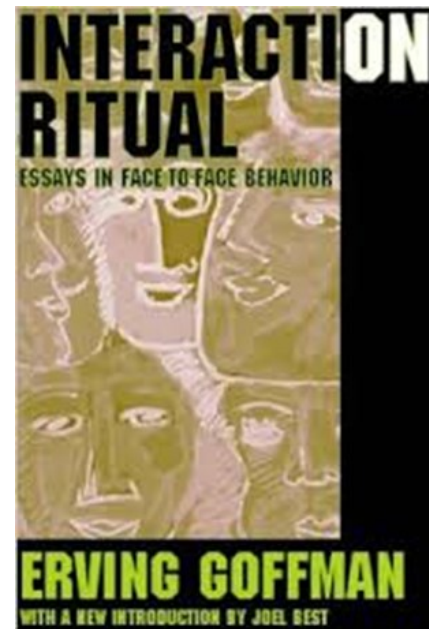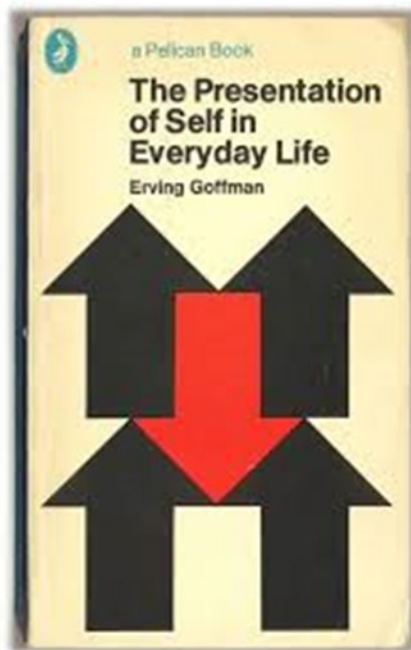
While not a social theorist, this famous quote from Shakespeare illustrates the next theory of identity and interaction we will discuss in the course. Like actors on a stage, we perform social roles in interaction. In interaction we communicate information about who we are just like stage actors must communicate their roles in a play. There is information about ourselves that we would like to others to know and see in interaction. How we understand and define the social situation and the self guides interaction. For example, we are all social actors within this course. What are the parts? How does that shape our understanding of reality and our interaction? The social situation determines both the roles and the rules of interaction. If we move the interaction to another setting, the roles and interaction rules change. Erving Goffman examines interaction through the metaphor of the stage and calls this theory dramaturgy.

Key Ideas in the Self and Social Interaction

1. In interaction we stage our presentation of self through the process of impression management.

This is a classical theory of identity performance. Impression management attempts to control how others perceive us by changing behavior to correspond to an ideal of what they find most appealing. Interaction is more complicated than complying to role expectations. Interaction is a presentation of yourself to others. Impression management can be calculated or more unconscious. We are aware of how others perceive us in interaction and within interaction we attempt to give of the most desirable and accurate impression of ourselves.
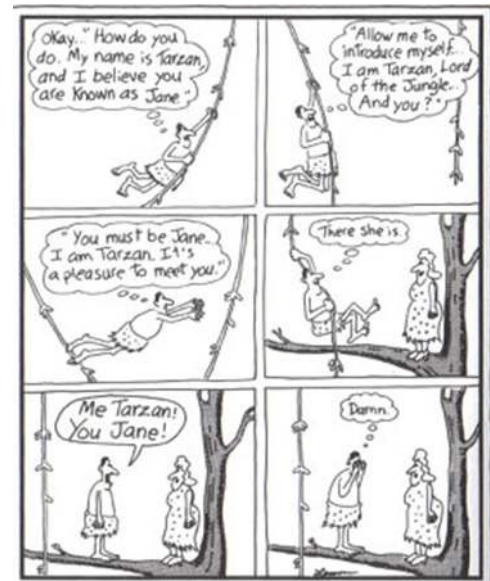
2. Impression management often relies on a collaboration with others.

We engage in identity performances that rely on the work of others to be successful. We often need to work in groups in social interaction. We also work with others in both the back stage and front stage interactions. We learn these norms and the structure of interactions as a part of our self presentations.

Key Ideas in the Self and Social Interaction

3. We can challenge and alter the self image others direct towards us and internally think through meaning of the different images.

We do not always receive a unified image of our self in interaction. And depending on the situation, that image may differ. We have the ability to think through the various self images others direct towards us. The images we receive the most become the most salient and can transform how we construction identity.

4. Technological advances have provided individuals with access to new and unique virtual spaces for the presentation of self.

Technological changes offer new realms of social interaction and identity construction. Virtual spaces provide new possibilities for social interaction making the presentation of self unique in these spaces. With today's technologies it no longer makes sense to distinguish between an online and offline self. With the avatar we become fully responsible for the virtual self we are presenting. You get to make all the choices in our presentation (hair, face, body shape, adornments) in different ways than the presentation of self in daily life where we have limited control over our presentation. In virtual world we can customize very pixel. Saving face or displaying backstage is also different because in virtual spaces you can quickly change to match situation.

Summary of the Readings

The readings in this unit apply the theory of impression management in various situations. All the studies show the centrality of interaction in the maintenance of identity.

This selection from Goffman's book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, provides a microanalysis of how individuals define themselves and others during social interaction. Goffman appropriates the metaphor of dramatic performance to show what individuals do to influence how others perceive them, as well as how those perceptions influence how individuals view themselves. He theorizes that actors in social interaction uphold a "working consensus," or a shared definition of the situation in which individual performances are carried out. Individuals generally try to uphold the definition of the situation, and when performances are discredited or contradicted, they will engage in defensive and protective practices so as to bring order to the situation.

Grazian introduces the social nature of "the girl hunt" – the practice of adolescent, heterosexual men seeking female sexual partners in social settings. Using data collected from undergraduates enrolled in his classes, Grazian argues that this form of public sexual behavior is less an interaction between men and women and more a collective activity conducted in the company of other men. He highlights various collective rituals (e.g., pregaming) and team strategies (e.g., the role of wingmen) to support this claim.

Adler and Adler provide empirical support for Goffman's theories regarding the presentation of self and Mead and Cooley's ideas on role-taking and the looking-glass self. The authors use participant observation and interviews of players in an esteemed basketball program to explore how celebrity status influences the emergence of a "gloried self." The identities of athletes are transformed through the process of reflected appraisals by fans, media, and others and the athletes' reactions to those appraisals.

The selection by Gottschalk discusses the presentation – and construction – of self in an online environment, Second Life. In addition to providing information on the website itself, he links processes there to those discussed in previous chapters (e.g., Goffman's impression management, Cooley's looking-glass self, and Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "me") and explores the relationship between the social and virtual worlds.