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Persson, Anders

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Anders Persson   **2021-01-01**

Dr., Professor, Dep. of Educational Sciences, Lund University, Sweden. Mail: anders.persson@uvet.lu.se

Introduction to Goffman´s sociology:
Being like others and becoming something else

> "I have been interested in social encounters, in the moments during which people come into and remain in one another's immediate presence, […] I am interested in how an individual must act to communicate that he is a member in good standing in a situation, in a conversation, or in an occupation, and I have been pursuing this interest for the past year as an observer in a State-type mental hospital."
> (Goffman, 1957, p. 12)

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life is the first of Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman's (1922-82) eleven books.[1] The title is indefinite and works just as well in 2020 as when it was first published in 1959. It has been translated into a number of different languages and is a sociological bestseller.

Goffman

A large number of texts have been written about Goffman and his sociological perspective. Already 20 years ago, a four-volume work was published that contains 91 previously published texts on Goffman's sociology (Fine & Smith, 2000). Prior to that, a number of books about Goffman were published and over the past 20 years, additional volumes of text about him have been written. There is also an internet archive, run by the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, with texts by and about Goffman and more than 100 short memorial texts about him written by colleagues, friends and others - many tribute texts but also other things. I myself have written two books and several anthology contributions and articles, e.g. (Persson, 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2018), on Goffman's sociological perspective. What else is there really to say? There is perhaps not so much to add because there is no longer so much new information about Goffman or his sociology. The new thing is that and how his texts meet new readers who can be inspired by his sociological perspective, use it as an analytical tool, and criticize its possible lack of relevance and develop it in the light of contemporary social interaction. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is about social interaction

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[1] This introduction to the sociology of Erving Goffman was originally published in Swedish 2020 in the seventh Swedish edition of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Thanks to professor emeritus Wade Nelson for assisting English editing.

interpreted in the light of a dramaturgical perspective. The first edition of it was published in 1959 (Goffman, 1959) and was preceded by a report version published in 1956 (Goffman, 1956) at the University of Edinburgh, where Goffman spent part of his doctoral studies. Both the report and the book are based on Goffman's doctoral dissertation from 1953 (Goffman, 1953a). Although the book was published 60 years ago, its theme is still relevant, perhaps more relevant than ever because we can no longer take the interaction order that Goffman examined for granted.

Goffman did not develop his dramaturgical perspective after *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, except for: the essay "Role Distance" in the book *Encounters* (Goffman, 1961b), the chapter "The Theatrical Frame" in *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974) and the chapter "Gender Display" in *Gender Advertisements* (Goffman, 1976) where Goffman analyses 500 advertisements to find patterns in the presentation of gender. Goffman published 48 texts that take different approaches to social interaction, such as: dramaturgy, total institutions, stigma, role distance, interaction rituals, game theory, public places, gambling, strategic interaction, frame analysis, gender presentations and language. All English editions of his books are in print.[2]

Goffman began his undergraduate studies at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg in 1939 and his major was chemistry. After a break as an employee of the Canadian Film Board, he continued his studies and in 1945 graduated with a degree in sociology from the University of Toronto. The same year he was accepted as a doctoral student at the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, graduated there in 1949 and received his doctorate in 1953 on the dissertation *Communication conduct in an island community*, which is based on a field study in the Shetland Islands. He was a teacher in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh 1949-1951, at the same time as the said fieldwork was being done. Goffman worked as a research assistant from 1952 to 1954 at the University of Chicago in two different research projects, led by Edward A. Shils and E. C. Banfield, respectively. The following year, he was hired as a visiting researcher at The National Institute of Mental Health in the United States and conducted, among other things, a year of covert participatory observation at a mental hospital. In 1958, Herbert Blumer invited Goffman to the Department of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, where he was first a lecturer, then what we in Sweden would call an associate professor and from 1962 a professor. During a period in

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[2] A complete bibliography of Goffman´s writings is to be found here:
https://lup.lub.lu.se/search/publication/4ac36d22-e342-4de7-af09-4d2f20cae80b

the 1960s, he worked as a blackjack dealer at a casino in Las Vegas and also advanced to pit boss. It is claimed that the casino stay was a participatory observation and it is mentioned in passing in the publications where Goffman writes about gambling (Goffman, 1967, 1970 [1969]). Goffman often played blackjack in Las Vegas and was reported to the police for card counting in the mid-1960s, which was also reported to the management of Berkeley University. Furthermore, Goffman spent 1966 at the Harvard Center for International Affairs and in 1968 was appointed Benjamin Franklin Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he remained until his death in 1982. The obituary in Time Magazine (December 6, 1982) describes Goffman as "an unorthodox sociologist who in his provocative books […] developed his somewhat sarcastic theories of contemporary rituals, based on the overlooked small events of everyday life…". Today, many, but far from all, agree with Fine's and Manning's description of Goffman as:

> "… the most significant American social theorist of the twentieth century; his work is widely read and remains capable of redirecting disciplinary thought. His unique ability to generate innovative and apt metaphors, coupled with the ability to name cogent regularities of social behavior, has provided him an important position in the sociological canon. Further, his sardonic, outsider stance has made Goffman a revered figure – an outlaw theorist who came to exemplify the best of the sociological imagination."

In the Goffman Archive at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Dmitri Shalin has published numerous interviews in which Goffman's acquaintances and colleagues reproduce memories of him. Given that Goffman was very quiet about his private life - his backstage to use one of his concepts that I will return to - one can in this memory bank get exciting insights into his life. Goffman studied the interaction order and portrayed it as strongly regulated by politeness, respect for the other and a willingness to blend in rather than stand out. In his own social interaction, he often broke the norms of interaction, of which there are many examples in the Goffman Archive. Let me give you an example. When Goffman was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Manitoba in 1976, he gave a speech to the newly graduated students that would probably even today be considered a breach of etiquette at a Swedish university. It was referenced in the Winnipeg Free Press under the heading "Aging idiots' gloomy world fore-cast for grads." Goffman believed that the students faced a bleak future, ruled by aging idiots in a society whose social forces no one seemed to understand. He made "distorted observations" about, among other things, outrageous patriotism and relapse into nationalism in Canada, stating (as if it were today): "We have obviously not yet learned to make democracy safe from the effects of the world." Goffman also urged students to

remain clear-sighted and curious because "the only worlds you are free to discover are those of the brain."

Self, presentation and everyday life

The original title of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is made up of three concepts. First and foremost, the concept of self. What does it mean? That question can be answered with reference to different meanings and uses of the term or what Elliot calls the idea of the self:

> "No idea is more unstable, flexible or pliable in contemporary social theory than that of the self. But what, exactly, is the self? We all have a sense of self-identity; we all perform 'selves' in the rituals of daily life; we all interact with other 'selves'. Yet how is the self rendered identical to itself? And why do our society and cultural life privilege *continuity* at the level of the self?" (Elliott, 2014, p. 15)

The self is thus, according to Elliott, the individual's "sense of self-identity" which the individual and her environment usually try to give a certain continuity over time, e.g. in stories about himself. Self, however, can mean different things in different scientific perspectives. When a psychologist like Susan Harter writes about "the construction of the self", she does so within the framework of a developmental psychological and sociocultural perspective and then defines self as follows:

> "It is important to clarify how the self is defined in this volume. At the most general level, I will refer to *self-representations*. These are attributes or characteristics of the self that are consciously acknowledged by the individual through language. That is, how does one describe oneself? […] How do we take ourselves as an object of our own reflection?" (Harter, 2012, pp. 19, 20)

Such meta-reflection on the self is also characteristic of Goffman's sociology. However, this does not mean that Goffman's perspective is psychological, which Gergen strongly emphasizes when he writes that Goffman "has illustrated the rich potential of addressing social interdependence without psychological explanation." (Gergen, 1994, p. 217). Gergen also writes that interdependent action - which he describes as the gap between the acting individuals - thus becomes central. It was this gap that the classical American social psychologist George Herbert Mead analysed in terms of e.g. role taking. Mead inspired Goffman, although he rarely referred to him. Mead had a completely different ambition with his sociology/social psychology than Goffman. Mead wanted to turn social psychology from a predominant individualistic to a more social and sociological view with social philosophical features and formulated this for example like this:

"The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly or immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience an behaviour in which both he and they are involved." (Mead, Morris, Huebner, & Joas, 2015 (1934), p. 138)

Mead analytically divides the self into I and me and Martin Berg describes the interplay between these as follows:

"…the self is made up of two inseparable aspects that are constantly in dialogue with each other: I and me. One aspect of the self, I, Mead wants to understand as the thinking or the 'reflective intelligence' that emerges as the individual becomes (self)conscious. This can be regarded as a kind of independent subjective aspect of the self, which is characterized by a capricious, creative, uncontrolled and impulsive action. The second aspect, me, should rather be understood as a 'conventional, habitual individual' acting as a bearer of the generalized other's attitude, since this 'me' is assumed to be founded in an organized form of the attitudes and roles that an individual takes over through the social interaction." (Berg, 2013, p. 30)

Mead's interactionist view of the individual is an important basis for Goffman's sociology and what Goffman does in *The Presentation of Self…* is to concretize interactionism by developing it into a kind of social influence game[3] where impression management and definition of the situation is of paramount importance to what is called the presentation of self… in the book title. It does not mean to present oneself to another or others in the narrow sense of identifying oneself to another, but rather to come forward before another and thereby present oneself within the framework of the current situation shared with others. It is then not certain that the self presented corresponds with how it is presented at other times, in front of other audiences that may be both individuals and groups, or to borrow some words from Kivisto & Pittman:

"Goffman does not believe in a "self" in the traditional sense; he does not think that we can discuss people's selves abstracted from their social situations. /…/ Goffman is arguing here that the self is not an entity that is in some sense antecedent to its enactment, but rather that it arises in the very process of performance." (Kivisto & Pittman, 1998, p. 273)

The individual may be the same from time to time but the individual's self exists in many versions depending on the situation and with whom he/she is interacting.

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[3] This influence game interpreted in terms of power, see chapter 9 "Interactional power - influencing others by framing social interaction" in my book *Framing Social Interaction* (Persson, 2018).

Finally, how are we to understand the concept "everyday life" in the original title of *The Presentation of Self…*? I believe, first of all, that Goffman linked to a current trend at the time of the publication, which in several different ways emphasized everyday life in sociological studies. Secondly, such a sociological orientation can be said to be in line with the sociological so-called Chicago school, of which Goffman was kind of a part, and which conveyed a perspective on society from below, often brusquely realistic and critical of the rulers' ideological notions of power, different from the image of society that often flourishes "up there". Goffman's perspective has more in common with the sub-view than with the top view of society and Goffman, according to Winkin, also responded well to what he calls "the Chicago habitus": empiricism, humour and empathy without social worker ambitions (Winkin, 1999, p. 34f). His abrupt realism is often described as "cynicism" and Gary Marx (Marx, 1984) described what he meant was Goffman's overriding thesis: "Don't take the world at face value". A critique of ideological attitudes that was apolitical and directed in all directions and not only "upwards". Thirdly, we can also see Goffman's use of the words everyday life as a rhetorical device where "everyday life" stands for repetition, routine and the like. This is probably also due to Goffman's fieldwork on the Shetland Island Unst - called Dixon in his doctoral dissertation in 1953 - where he for twelve months "… tried to play an unexceptional and acceptable role in community life /… / an observant participant rather than a participating observer " (Goffman, 1953a, p. 2). He participated in as many as possible of the different situations and practices where members of society interacted face to face, such as meals, different types of work, schooling, shop loitering, weddings, parties, socials and funerals.

Some everyday life researchers equate routine with everyday life, which is of course true, but some of what is routinized, in particular Goffman's study object social interaction, is not only found in everyday life. Social interaction is everywhere: in everyday life and in other life, in politics, leisure, school and working life, at home and at work, in institutions, relationships, studies, love, funerals and research. Social interaction is simply one of our most frequent activities, perhaps more common than being alone. I think that is exactly what Goffman occasionally discusses in his speech as the new president of the American Sociological Association in 1982, a speech that he wrote but never had the opportunity to give because he fell ill with stomach cancer and died in November 1982. The speech was published in 1983 under the title "The interaction order", and there Goffman, as so many times before, defines his object of study as social interaction in social situations where two or more individuals are

in close physical proximity to each other. He then states that this starting point, i.e. body close to body, means that sociological distinctions between rural life and urban life, between family life and public life and between long-term intimate and fluid impersonal relationships cannot be maintained when it comes to social interaction and continues:

> "… pedestrian traffic rules can be studied in crowded kitchens as well as crowded streets, interruption rights at breakfast as well as in courtrooms, endearment vocatives in supermarkets as well as in the bedroom. /…/ My concern over the years has been to promote acceptance of this face-to-face domain as an analytically viable one - a domain which might be titled, for want of any happy name, the interaction order - a domain whose preferred method of study is microanalysis. (Goffman, 1983, p. 2)

Based on the above, I would argue that when Goffman used the word 'everyday life', he did not do it primarily to delimit a part of reality that differs from 'politics', 'bureaucracy' etc. He rather used it as a symbol for a world where repetition, routines and assumptions taken for given prevail, a world that, at the same time and precisely because of this, is vulnerable to the slightest disturbances.

What is Goffman's sociology about?

Every now and then, I take the road past the drawers with books sorted out at the Department of Sociology in Lund - where I previously worked. It is a rich library of usually older, often unread and obviously unwanted literature. I have never found any of Goffman's eleven books there. Most recently, I found one of my own works there, a report published in 1996 and unfortunately as new, preserved on the shelf of a probably now retired colleague. I brought with me three books from the library of the unwanted, one of them was *The Road to Class Society* by German sociologist Kurt J. Huch which is about socialization in family and school. I have a habit or bad habit that makes me search the name "Goffman" in every book that has an index. I found Goffman on page 20 in Huch's book, where he describes different ways to study social systems by focusing on opportunities for individuals to deviate from role expectations and collective norms: "It is for such opportunities for behaviour that Erving Goffman introduced the concept of 'role distance ', which on the whole creates a person's individuality." (Huch, 1977[1972], p. 20). As is often the case with Goffman, there is no agreement on his contribution, which can be illustrated by another German text that is contemporary with Huchs and which describes the phenomenon of role distance in a completely different way: "… a particularly refined and dangerous kind of human perspective change " (Ottomeyer, 1978[1977], p. 100). These two Germans - the first more empirically oriented and the second more governed by political ideology, but both on the fringes of the

scientific discussion of Goffman's sociology since the mid-1950s - illustrate the great influence Goffman's perspective had during his lifetime. After his death, his influence has increased successively and over the past 15 years, it has been established that he is one of the most read and quoted sociologists. However, this is not because he was indifferent and suited everyone, but rather because he was controversial and that his writings are useful in many different contexts.

Goffman is both a controversial and popular sociologist and many other sociologists claim, on more or less good grounds, that Goffman was such diverse things as Durkheimian, microfunctionalist, symbolic interactionist, phenomenological sociologist, postmodern sociologist, structuralist, social constructivist and some other. Goffman did not say much about these various attempts to define him. In one of very few interviews (done in 1980), Goffman was asked if he is a symbolic interactionist and answers:

> "… I've never felt that a label was necessary. If I had to be labelled at all it would have been as a Hughesian urban ethnographer […] But the people who ordinarily label themselves symbolic interactionists […] are persons much like myself, like Fred Davis, Howie Becker, people like that. They are basically Hughesian sociologists who employ a quite general Meadian frame of reference that everybody of that period employed." (Verhoeven, 1993, p. 318f)

In an eleven-line "autobiographical sketch" in an anthology published in 1957, Goffman writes about his research interest:

> "I have been interested in social encounters, in the moments during which people come into and remain in one another's immediate presence […]. I am interested in how an individual must act to communicate that he is a member in good standing in a situation, in a conversation, or in an occupation, and I have been pursuing this interest for the past year as an observer in s State-type mental hospital." (Goffman, 1957, p. 12)

Social interaction was Goffman's object of study and the dramaturgical perspective he develops in *The Presentation of Self* is an aspect of his interactionism.

I read Erving Goffman for the first time as a sociology student in the late 1970s. At that time, his texts were not particularly popular in Swedish sociology. I cannot prove what text it was but I am almost convinced that it was the book *Asylums* (Goffman, 1961a), the one of Goffman's texts that sang least falsely in the radical 1960s and 70s. In Sweden, *Asylums* was then almost exclusively perceived as a critical examination of various compulsory institutions, in particular the mental hospital, which it is, but also so much more. It is also, for example, about the special forms of resistance that individuals develop within coercive institutions. In my doctoral dissertation 1991 I referred to the same book but also to *The Presentation of Self*. When I got a postdoctoral position in 1997-99, I decided to investigate the then extremely

current phenomenon of social competence and Goffman became an important source of inspiration. Since then I have read everything Goffman has published and lots of articles and books about Goffman and his sociological perspective and published two books about his sociology (Persson, 2012b, 2018) and several articles and book chapters on the subject. In the following, I will briefly describe what Goffman's sociology is about. The reader should keep in mind that there are other perceptions about this, which I briefly describe in the above-mentioned books.

Goffman's overall perspective: ritualized and vulnerable interaction order

The kind of everyday social interaction mentioned above was Goffman's main study object. His sociology involved an exploration of social situations and the social interactions that occur there, which he tried to understand – from his doctoral dissertation in 1953 until his death in 1982 – as part of an interaction order. That order can be described as an interplay between a ritualized social interaction – in the sense of repeated, fixed and "sacred" – which at the same time is vulnerable and can be broken down by disturbances. Start singing the next time you ride a train or are in a public place and note the others' both bothered and expectant but perhaps also amused glances and you will probably understand that the interaction order is vulnerable and may temporarily stop working. But it is usually just as easily re-established by the interacting people - it is often enough that they only return to the "normal state" for what Goffman called working consensus to re-emerge. But this consensus really has no other "content" than a rather superficial and temporary mutual acceptance. We can link this to recognition, which is a hot topic today, both in research, everyday life and politics. In Heidegren's magnificent book on particularly Honneth's perspective on recognition, recognition is presented as a result of certain social conditions (e.g. individuals' rights) and relationships between individuals (love) and individual recognition (appreciation or recognized individuality). Mead and Goffman are also mentioned in this context because both can be said to have developed perspectives where recognition has a place. In Goffman, the concept of recognition is not central at all, except for the book *Stigma* (Goffman, 1961a). Goffman describes disability and various deviations in the light of what is considered to be normal in society. People that deviate from society's identity values have difficulty gaining recognition from others. Goffman is however also interested in another social interaction dynamic where recognition also can be given a role, albeit in a completely different way. It is then about interaction with unknown others on trains, buses and public places, trains, buses, or large shopping malls and all other places where strangers meet - not because they primarily

want to meet - but because they are out on similar errands and then encounter unknown others. These can be described as "unsignificant others" rather than insignificant others and can be compared with Meads significant others (e.g. role models) and the generalized other (norms of society internalized by individuals). Unsignificant others get a kind of recognition when they do not "stand out", do not demand our attention, are not noticed, etc. Unsignificant others should not interfere, they should be "normal" or put on a show of normalcy so that we can continue with our purchases in the store, our waiting in the waiting room and our reading on the bus or train.

Goffman studied common everyday life, that which takes place in, for example, workplaces, trains, public places and in schools. Outwardly everyday life is not very dramatic, but it has its dramaturgy and it is the one that Goffman highlights with his so-called dramaturgical perspective on social interaction. The concepts performance, role, front and backstage are perhaps the ones that most obviously portray life and everyday life as drama, but Goffman also created a whole range of other concepts to understand the order and dramaturgy of social interaction.

Goffman interpreted the routine social interaction in everyday life as a social interaction ritual based on respect for the individual as an almost sacred object. Individuals are helping each other to maintain a kind of balance and stability in their social interactions and thus contribute in an unintended way to maintain the interaction order. This is where they need and develop an ability to interact with others that may vary over time, with person and with situation but which also have certain common features:

> "… societies everywhere, if they are to be societies, must mobilize their members as selfregu-lating participants in social encounters. One way of mobilizing the individual for this purpose is through ritual; he is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise. These are some of the elements of behavior which must be built into the person if practical use is to be made of him as an interactant, and it is these elements that are referred to in part when one speaks of universal human nature.
>
> Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without." (Goffman, 1967, p. 45)

When this works, there is a kind of balance or equilibrium which in Goffman's perspective is presented as the result of tacit agreements between the interactors and which he thus called working consensus. But this consensus is vulnerable. A barely visible blink that is perceived by someone other than the person for whom it was intended can, for example, have

devastating consequences for the balance of social interactions that can sometimes be completely put out of play. However, in most cases it can be restored just as quickly.

In another context, I have described the order of the interaction as it is in the balance (Persson, 2012b). Two "forces" are at work: on the one hand ritualization and on the other hand vulnerability. Dichotomies such as "ritualization – vulnerability" are common tools in sociological analysis, such as the Gemeinschaft – Gesellschaft (Tönnies, 1957[1887]), mechanical solidarity – organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1964[1893]) and rationalization – charisma (Weber, 1978 [1921]) to name just three classics. Everett Hughes published in 1951 an article entitled "Mistakes at work", which can mean both mistakes at work and mistakes in work, and argued that all work can be made the subject of comparative study if one can design a frame of reference within which they can be compared: "To this end, we are looking for common themes in human work. One such theme is routine and emergency " (Hughes, 1951, p. 320). Hughes was one of Goffman's teachers during his doctoral studies in Chicago, and the article was published at the same time as Goffman completed his doctoral dissertation. Hughes' idea may have inspired Goffman, and the step between "routine – emergency" and "ritual – vulnerability" is not very far. The difference is that Goffman, with the help of Durkheim, makes a socio-religious interpretation of "routine", which is transformed into ritual, and thus the respect for the individual is enlarged to a kind of secular religion, while "emergency" is reinterpreted from a specific crisis that occurs from time to time to a constantly lurking vulnerability. But Goffman not only constructed a dichotomous analytical tool but also took another step, focusing on the balance of social interaction between ritualization and vulnerability, and asking under which conditions equilibrium is maintained, broken down, and restored. The balance between ritualization and vulnerability can be described as working consensus.

Commuting and interaction

5.30 the alarm clock rings, I get up, make the bed, shower, look in the mirror, get dressed, pick up the newspapers. Breakfast: a glass of water, apple juice mixed with yogurt in a glass, two crispy sandwiches, coffee and newspaper reading. Then tooth brushing, outerwear on, backpack on, keys, mirror, lock, is the computer in the backpack?, 25 minutes bus to the train station, 30 minutes train, buy lunch salad, 15 minute walk to the department, start the computer, toilet visit, mirror, mail , transcripts, final preparations for today's meetings, supervision and more. This is my morning routine or ritual the days I commute to and work in

Lund.[4] In dramaturgical terms, Goffman also talks about role and it is similar to routine and ritual in that it indicates a way of acting that can be repeated over and over again. If the ritual is broken, the whole working day seems to be transformed, but not necessarily for the worse.

In the mirror, mentioned above from time to time, I meet not only myself but also my own generalized image of the others and the societal norms they convey to me during our social interaction. In addition to my wife, the first concrete people I meet are other commuters - first on the bus, then on the train and during the walk to the department. I do not necessarily have much in common with fellow travellers because our common situation almost always consists of queues, crowding and stress. We are mostly more competitors than anything else, but we also maintain an interaction order.

People on the bus and train are in their own bubble with a mobile phone, computer, newspaper or book. Some sleep, others work and others just sit, still others commute in groups and talk about work, family and more. On the train and during boarding and disembarking, we perceive each other primarily as bodies and seldom recognize each other's existence as anything other than that. Sometimes, however, we recognize each other as more than just bodies and it can then happen through both linguistic and body language communication - a thank you, a look, a pat on the shoulder, a reprimand in the train's quiet section, a wink, an offer of a seat , a nod, a helping hand. A smile is sometimes answered with a smile, sometimes with a downcast look. The order we establish works, but tensions lurk beneath the surface and make the order vulnerable.

Many on the train seem to me more and more robot-like. They push themselves without apology and soon I do too. They stare unexpectedly in search of the last vacant seat in this very concrete household with scarce resources. Is another order of interaction establishing itself in the crowded train? Within the travellers - at least this traveller - there is a low-intensity exploration of the others, their appearance, clothes, scents, conversations, relationships - which can increase in intensity if something unusual happens and breaks the order. Some cough intensely, snore, talk loudly, expose their privacy in the mobile phone call, someone else tries to silence a screaming baby. However, the vast majority do not deviate from the routine, they are visible but may prefer to just blend in. For a while, most of us have the same goal: to get a seat, arrive on time and this as smoothly as possible. In precisely these respects, we cooperate but without acknowledging this as cooperation. In situations like these

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44 The Corona pandemic changed this routine while I was writing this text.

- which we can also encounter in workplaces, schools, streets and squares, business centers - the social interaction is often anonymous and we control the impressions of others by trying to present ourselves as normal. We make a normalcy show to prevent others from notice us in a pointing way. In other social situations - among friends, in the family, in the circle of colleagues - our self-presentations may very well also be about showing ourselves as less normal: a little better than colleagues in the workplace, more special than others present, more knowledgeable, wealthier, poorer etc. We are in many ways like others but can also become something else.

Goffman´s methods: observation, frame analysis and concept formation

The commuting situation above could have been one of Goffman's study objects. He wrote very little about his way of working as a researcher, his methods, and in that respect he is possibly not a good research ethics role model for today's researchers. Or maybe he is just that if you consider that research ethics seems to be used more and more by authorities to guide and govern research. Some of Goffman´s studies are based on participatory observations, but his way of doing them does not quite agree with any of Gold's (1958) four observer roles. Goffman described himself as "an observant participant, rather than a participatory observer" (Goffman, 1953a, p. 2) and his observation technique is perhaps more similar to that of an anthropologist than a sociologist. He made observations within the framework of his studies of social interaction life on the Shetland Island of Unst, at a mental hospital in Washington DC and in gambling dens in Las Vegas. By observation, Goffman meant a method by which data is generated by:

> "… subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals /…/. So that you are close to them while they are responding to what life does to them. /…/ When you do that, it seems to me, the standard technique is to try to subject yourself, hopefully, to their life circumstances, which means that although, in fact, you can leave at any time, you act as if you can't and you try to accept all of the desirable and undesirable things that are a feature of their life." (Goffman, 1989, p. 125)

For Goffman, observation seems to have been shared experience. He was also skeptical of the interview as a research method and yet in an interview he makes a critical reflection on the interview method: "What an individual says he does, or what he likes that he does, has very little bearing very often on what he actually does. " (Verhoeven, 1993, p. 322). The critique of the interview is, one might say, a confirmation of the perspective Goffman takes on social interaction in *The Presentation of Self*. At some point, however, Goffman did interviews such as in an early study of gas station managers, their work and tensions between different roles in

the work (Goffman, 1953b). Goffman has been criticized for being too quiet when it comes to scientific method and it is a fair critique to the extent that there are no comprehensive methodological reasoning in his books and articles. In a recent study of Goffman's book *Frame Analysis*, however, I have shown that when it comes to analysis of collected observational and textual material, there is methodological continuity over time in Goffman's analyzes. Based on Goffman's texts, I point to four recurring features in Goffman's analyzes of social interaction in different contexts:

1. governing mechanisms, which here constitute a collective concept for rules, norms, normative expectations, conventions, routines, rituals, roles, regularities, institutions, schemes, etc. that are or can be regulators of action and interaction and affect the degrees of freedom of action of individuals in situations where they interact with others,

2. the situation or, in other words, the spatial delimitation of the interaction;

3. the performance of the interaction, and

4. the dynamics of the interaction and the situation. By dynamics is meant a kind of theory of force that deals with how entities (e.g. individuals, groups, organizations) within a shared space influence each other in a number of different ways. They interact, end up in tension and conflict, exist side by side but are indifferent to one another, are involved in coordinated interactions that can give rise to both intended and unintended consequences, etc. The dynamics of the interactional context is the sense or, in other words, the actual frame and framing which results from the encounter between governing mechanisms and the actual making of the interaction within the present situation.

Goffman's main working method, however, was concept formation. He created at least 900 concepts according to a study done in 1980 by the sociologist Susan Birrell according to (Williams, 1988, p. 88). The concepts he created could be both descriptive and theoretical. If one is to understand Goffman's sociology, one must thus understand his concepts. Many of these concepts are razor-sharp and were used by Goffman to systematize, analyze and interpret materials that mostly consisted of observation and text data. In the following, I will present some of his key concepts.

Some of Goffman's dramaturgical and interactional concepts

Goffman developed what he called a dramaturgical perspective on social interaction, which means that he uses metaphors from the world of the theatre to understand social interaction in

other contexts. Goffman argued that this perspective could complement four other perspectives being used to study "social institutions": a technical perspective that emphasizes efficiency, a political perspective that places the greatest emphasis on social control and power, a structural perspective that emphasizes patterns in social relations and the distribution of social status in society, and finally a cultural perspective that focuses on morals, customs, usages, etc.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective rests on two existential conditions. First, we always share a social situation with other individuals and if we are alone we can share a situation with others in thought by imagining how others would have thought and done in the current situation. Secondly, we lack a completely reliable knowledge of those with whom we share a social situation, but we usually choose to trust them. Goffman transforms these existential conditions into two knowledge problems: definition of the situation and social information. Individuals need to be able to define and manage situations that are shared with others. Individuals also need to be able to read the situation, the others in the situation and gather social information to be convinced that the situation and the others are as they appear to be.

In the following, I will present some of the concepts Goffman uses in *The Presentation of Self* to develop the dramaturgical perspective.

Impression management, expressions given and expressions given off

Impression management is both a core concept and research object in *The Presentation of Self* and other Goffman texts, and ultimately what his dramaturgical perspective is about. Based on the perspective of theatrical performance, Goffman presents the social interaction between individuals as an information game:

> "… a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery. It should be added that since the others are likely to be relatively unsuspicious of the presumably unguided aspect of the individual's conduct, he can gain much by controlling it.". (Goffman, 1959, p. 20)

Impression management means that interacting individuals try to control the impressions they make on each other. This requires control over the expressions one gives and Goffman distinguishes between two kinds of expressions: expressions given and expressions given off. We mostly have more control over the expressions given than the expressions given off. Goffman describes this difference by emphasizing that we cannot stop giving off expressions. As long as we are close to others we give off expressions but we do not necessarily give expressions. A smile during a conversation with another individual is an expression given,

while an uncontrolled laughter is an expression given off. In other words, expressions given are part of impression management itself. Expressions given off are not in the same obvious way, because in most cases they are not premeditated and may rather represent a lack of control of impression management.

The cover image on the front of the first edition of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* 1959, as well as on the cover of the latest Swedish edition of it 2020, illustrates the book's most important concept: impression management. The cover shows two extremely well-dressed society ladies (Mrs. George Washington Kavenaugh and Lady Decies who were both known for their generous support of various cultural institutions) and a not-so-well-dressed woman watching them.
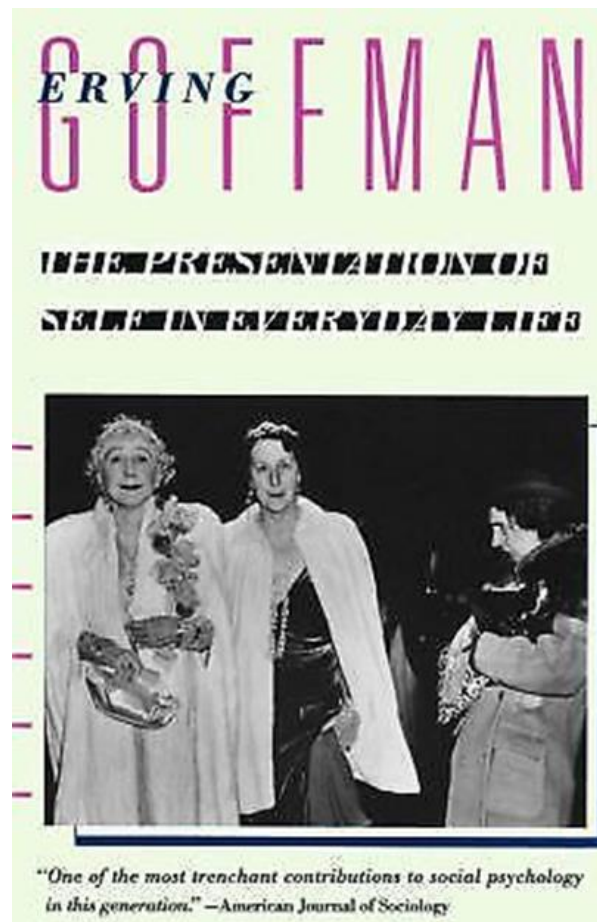
The picture is called *The Critic* and was taken in 1943 by the famous photographer Arthur Fellig (called Weegee) and well illustrates a general sociological message about class differences. It is alleged that the image was used in psychological warfare by the Germans in the Battle of Anzio in Italy 1944. Flyers with the image were dropped from aircraft over the American soldiers in the trenches with the following text added: "Soldiers! Is this what you

are fighting for?" Another interpretation is that the less well-dressed woman is the critic of the society ladies.

The origins of the image, however, given the use of it on the cover of Goffman's book, reveal further dimensions. The picture was arranged, at least according to the photographer's assistant who revealed this only in 1996. The well-dressed ladies certainly came out of limousines on their way to an anniversary premiere at The Metropolitan Opera in New York, but the less well-dressed woman had been picked up by photographer Weegee's assistant at her regular bar and offered her so much wine that she could barely stand on her own. The assistant held the woman so that she would not fall. When the two ladies passed and after a signal from the photographer, he let go of the woman. Weegee was ready and took the photo. It became WeeGees most famous picture. He never admitted that that the photo was arranged, but said that he only discovered the drunk woman when he edited the picture. We do not know if Goffman or whoever chose the image for the cover knew of its origins. A better picture, however, must be sought to illustrate the multifaceted phenomenon of impression management. The two ladies of society manage obvious impressions through their carefully selected and complex equipment. The poor and drunk woman is a non-person in the current situation and as such does not have to manage impressions. The photographer managed impressions by photographing the society ladies together with a poor woman and by naming the image *The Critic* and possibly by arranging the image.

Definition of the situation

The concept "definition of the situation" was not created by Goffman, but exists in American sociology since the early 20th century. It was developed and presented by Thomas & Znaniecki in the book *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (1918). Situations in which individuals interact - in a store, school class, factory, family, in a square, in a train, etc. - can be defined independently of individuals' views of the situation or be dependent on the individual's views. The statement "this train is full of people" can be a definition of the situation that is independent of individual definitions, while a subjective definition is rather about the meaning the individuals give the situation, e.g. "I can't stand this crowding". Goffman sees "definition of the situation" as an important part of impression management, because this particular definition affects how individuals (and other actors) act and interact within the framework of the situation. The definition of the situation is what impression management often aims to influence.

Front and back region and outside

Goffman draws a line that radically divides the social world into places where the individual is perceived by others and places where the individual is not. Front (facade, front region) is the part of the performance that is staged to intentionally define the situation that is shared with others. Backstage (behind the scenes, back region) is the place where "… the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course." (Goffman, 1959, p. 112) These concepts thus describe a kind of impression geography or spatiality. In the front region, the individual is seen, heard, yes, perceived in every possible way by others and can be likened to the stage of the theater. The back region corresponds to places that in the theater are usually called behind the scenes, where the individual is not seen by those who see him/her in the front region. In addition to these two, there is also a kind of residual category that Goffman calls the outside where we find the outsiders, those who are not affected at all by what is happening in the front and back regions that define the performance.

The Presentation of Self was published 60 years ago and it is noticeable not only in the language and expressions that we do not use today, but also in Goffman's description of the interaction order. Then, the division into front and backstage was in many ways different from what it is today. This is visible in various late modern social media, where the display of what is happening backstage has almost become the rule, e.g. filming the newborn baby and sometimes even the birth, what to eat for dinner, the group of friends on the booze and more. This does not mean that nowadays the backstage missing, but rather that the boundary between front- and backstage is drawn in a different way today than in the 1950s. The interaction order has undergone a radical change. See also (Persson, 2001) and (Persson, 2012a).

Performance

Goffman defines performance as "… all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). According to this early definition and in the context of interaction, performance is the same as the individual's or another actor's impression-managing activity. If we compare Goffman's use of the term with Judith Butlers (Butler, 2006 [1999]), Goffman often uses it against the background of a division into functional and expressive, while Butler uses the term against the background of the difference between essence and construction. Goffman and Butler both argue further against something else. Against perceptions stating that performance only is done in relation to function (Goffman) or essence (Butler). Both are sceptical about ideas that

the individual's identity is internal and constant on more or less strongly formulated ontological grounds. Instead, they claim that identity arises and develops in an interplay between the individual and the environment. Goffman puts it this way:

> "In this report the performed self was seen as some kind of image, usually creditable, which the individual on stage and in character effectively attempts to induce others to hold in regard to him. While this image is entertained *concerning* the individual, so that a self is imputed to him, this self itself 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. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the 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." (Goffman, 1959, p. 252f)

Ritual, routine and role

Goffman was interested in both the slower and volatile elements of the interaction order. Ritual and routine can be said to belong to the slower elements because the individual can allow himself to be surrounded by the routine or let ritual take over the action, while impression management may belong to the more volatile elements of the interaction order. Goffman seldom uses the term ritual in *The Presentation of Self*, but describes interaction between individuals in a way that is recognizable from those of his texts where the term ritual is used (Goffman, 1955, 1956, 1971, 1981), for example like this:

> "… any projected definition of the situation /…/ has a distinctive moral character. It is this moral character of projections that will chiefly concern us in this report. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought in fact to be what he claims he is." (Goffman, 1959, p. 13)

The ritual elements here are partly the respect for the individual and partly that the individual must be faithful to the presentation he/she makes of himself/herself. Routine is described as predetermined action patterns, while Goffman defines role as established action patterns that can be played on different occasions. Role is, in a way, placed between the slower and volatile elements of the interaction order. In other texts Goffman developed concepts to capture the varying nature of the role, or rather the individuals' use of it. In the fascinating essay *Role Distance*, Goffman places role-creation on a continuum whose endpoints are role-embracing and role-distance:

> "To embrace a role is to disappear completely into the virtual self available in the situation, to be fully seen in terms of the image, and to confirm expressively one's acceptance of it. To embrace a role is to be embraced by it." (Goffman, 1961b, p. 106)

Role distance, on the other hand, is about the person who plays the role marking that he/she is not quite as the role suggests, to consciously or unconsciously "strike a wedge between the individual and his role, between doing and being" (Goffman, 1961b, p. 107f). Thus we can imagine that an individual can be completely embraced by the student role and play all its significant features in front of other students and teachers at the university. At home, on the other hand, the student in question can distance himself from the role before e.g. friends who are not students. To grasp such cases, Goffman develops the concepts of belief in the role - meaning a sincere appearance – and the cynical appearance meaning not believing in the role.

Impression management techniques: dramaturgical loyalty, discipline and circumspection

Both individuals and groups can exercise impression management, but one can assume that group performances require a greater degree of coordination between the performers, while the vulnerability of impression management is also greater. Impression management is exposed to disturbances of various kinds, e.g. unintentional gestures, missteps and "inappropriate intrusion". Goffman therefore asks: How does one maintain a balance between "successful role-playing" and disruption? The answer to that question is three impression management techniques:

Dramaturgical loyalty: to be loyal to the impression of oneself and/or the situation that the performing person(s) wants to give.

Dramaturgical discipline: that even when you are carried away by your own performance, a part of you must check that the performance goes home.

Dramaturgical circumspection: to protect the performance before and after by not revealing things to the audience that could damage the image of the performance.

Civil inattention

Goffman links the term tactful inattention to servants who choose not to see inappropriate actions of those they serve. The concept is a precursor to the concept of civil inattention, which is carefully explained in *Behavior in Public Places* (Goffman, 1963, pp. 83-88). The concept means to show considerate inattention when interacting with others. It answers i.a. against a special eye work that strangers perform in public places: first quickly sweep over the other with your gaze and then lower your gaze to show that the other is not of special interest.

Civil inattention "… makes possible copresence without commingling, awareness without engrossment, courtesy without conversation", writes Lofland (1998, p. 82).

Working consensus

Working consensus is a kind of equilibrium between socially interacting individuals. It is a temporary consensus around the conviction that the alternative to equilibrium is worse. In his doctoral dissertation, Goffman clarifies that he does not see social interaction as a "scene of harmony", but rather as an arrangement for "practicing a cold war" (Goffman, 1953a, p. 40).

Being like others and becoming something else

The title of this introduction - *Being like others and becoming something else* - is an attempt to describe a recurring theme in Goffman's texts. Being like others means that individuals who interact with each other are governed by what can be called governing mechanisms such as norms, upbringing, rules, education, habits, fashion, laws, feelings of shame, expectations, exercise of power, etc. This makes them equal in terms of how they organize and frame their everyday life, how they interact, how they show up when they meet others and what they hide from others. Everyday life with its routines and rituals and working life with its roles can illustrate this. If we were to be content with these governing mechanisms, Goffman's sociology would be a kind of functionalist microsociology, but Goffman also considered various forms of governing mechanisms that constitute resistance to order. Becoming something else means that the individual who interacts with others can transform shared situations through impression management, role-taking, hiding stigma (stigma management), facial work, role distance, role embracing, interaction rituals, framing and reframing situations - just to name a few. These processes of creating likeness and otherness in social interaction are one of Goffman's recurring objects of study.

Goffman's sociology is not a theory of society nor a theory of the individual, but a theory of or a perspective on a social interaction order that faces both the individual and society. For the most part, he avoided taking a stand between a more structuralist and a more voluntarist approach in sociology. In Goffman's sociology, society and "the others" are always present in the form of governing mechanisms that both make individuals more uniform, but also generate resistance that can create differences. This is expressed, among other things, as a constant adaptive pressure on the individual, a social compulsion or pressure that individuals contribute to maintaining to the extent that they adapt to it, sometimes try to resist and sometimes play adapted to. It is precisely this multidimensionality that is characteristic of

Goffman's perspective, and we can find many descriptions of it in his texts, for example in the essay *Role Distance*:

> "… the individual must be seen as someone who organizes his expressive situational behaviour *in relation* to situated activity roles, but that in doing this he uses whatever means are at hand to introduce a margin of freedom and maneuverability, of pointed disidentification, between himself and the self virtually available for him in the situation. Instead, then, of starting with the notion of a definition of the situation we must start with the idea that a particular definition is *in charge of the situation*, and that as long as this control is not overtly threatened or blatantly rejected, much counter-activity will be possible." (Goffman, 1961b, p. 132f)

In connection to this, Goffman describes the interaction context as an arena where

> "…the individual constantly twists, turns, and squirms, even while allowing himself to be carried along by the controlling definition of the situation. The image that emerges of the individual is that of a juggler and synthesziser, an accommodator and appeaser, who fulfils one function while he is apparently engaged in another…" (Goffman, 1961b, p. 139)

One defining theme in Goffman's sociology and significant in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is impression management. This means that actors, both individuals and organizations, try and can often control others' impressions of themselves. The degree of impression management can vary from everyday small decorations of oneself in interactions with others, to people who in the autumn of their life create a perhaps too coherent story about their lives, over lonely-hearts racketeers to large-scale fraudsters. Impression management can be a way to become something else, a way to perform oneself or take on one role or another. However, Goffman also points out that the situation can become something else by, for example, the interactors redefining the frame that defines and controls the dynamics of the existing situation. Examples of such nuance shifts are transitions from doing something serious to pretending or from warming up to compete or a number of others that Goffman describes as follows:

> "My aim is to try to isolate some of the basic frameworks of understanding available in our society for making sense out of events and to analyze the special vulnerabilities to which these frames of reference are subject. I start with the fact that from an individual's particular point of view, while one thing may momentarily appear to be what is really going on, in fact what is actually happening is plainly a joke, or a dream, or an accident, or a mistake, or a misunderstanding, or a deception, or a theatrical performance, and so forth." (Goffman, 1974, p. 10)

How is one to understand the energetic interest that Goffman showed in the phenomena of "being like others" and "becoming something else"? The answer can only be a speculation where Goffman's social transformation from the son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in 1920s Canada to one of America's, perhaps one of the world's, foremost sociologists would

have been significant. This social mobility may be an explanation for his role as a contradictory outsider. But to that answer must also be added the importance of the American society in which Goffman made a career after becoming a doctoral student at the University of Chicago in the mid-1940s, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s, and professor at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 1960s until his death in 1982.

In 1953 Goffman defended his dissertation, a study of communication and social interaction on the remote Shetland Island of Unst where the inhabitants worked in agriculture and fishing. On Unst Goffman conducted a twelve-month ethnographic study of the island's social interaction life. The dissertation was revised and published as a report in 1956 and 1959 as the book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The differences between dissertation and book are large. Both are about social interaction, but in the book Goffman refines the study of impression management in terms of self-presentation, performance, definition of the situation and more.

The society in which Goffman found himself when that book emerged was an American post-war society where World War II (1939-45), with 45-60 million killed in the war and 6 million murdered during the Holocaust, had turned into a "cold war" society marked by a nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union. Existentially, the horrors of war and the Holocaust were at the same time, mixed with the fear of the atomic bomb, while the United States, in competition with the Soviet Union, took the position of the dominant superpower. USA had also become a cultural model for almost the whole world in terms of market economy, career thinking, youth culture, higher education, lifestyle, consumption, suburban living, music, clothes, self-made men (and some women), TV, family life and much more. Immigration was extensive and characterized especially Chicago where Goffman was active in the 1950s. Immigration itself was a transformation from life in European class societies to the United States as an alleged society of opportunity. At the same time, racial discrimination, violence, poverty and communist scare prevail.

Impression management and definition of the situation became everyday activities in this complex post-war society. Think of the American cars of the 1950s - the lavish, bulky, greedy, petrol-thirsty American car that still attracts attention when gray-haired "cruisers" with the grandchildren in the back seat, glide around in small Swedish towns. It's impression management if anything, a sheet metal identity as viable as an increasingly watered-down noble title.

To step out of one´s group and become something else when one is expected to be like others is a trait that united a number of different events and phenomena in the American post-war society - where Goffman developed his sociology. But also the opposite, to continue to be like others while the expectations of becoming something else slowly fade or hold one in an increasingly desperate grip. The individual as well as the situation could be the same and become something else and Goffman captures the similarity and otherness in his studies. The everyday micro-transformations of individuals and situations – framing social interaction in other words – were in many ways Goffman's basic thought figure.

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