Erving Goffman (1922-1982)

Ph.D. from University of Chicago

Often grouped with symbolic interactionists, but complained that the label was “too vague”

His work differs from other symbolic interactionists in that he was concerned with how “society… forces people to present a certain image of themselves… because it forces us to switch back and forth between many complicated roles, is also making us always somewhat untruthful, inconsistent, and dishonorable” (Collins 1986)

Influenced symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology

Key books include:

*Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959)

*Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1961)

*Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (1963)

*Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963)

*Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (1967)

*Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order* (1971)


*Gender Advertisements* (1979)

Coined or popularized many terms, including: total institution, civil inattention, stigma, impression management, frontstage, backstage, role distance, frame and framing.
Some Elements of Goffman’s Dramaturgical Perspective

Self, interaction and social organization are performances.

Claims made about who I am, claims made about the definition of the situation and claims made about my “team” and “social establishment” are interrelated.

“The individual constantly acts to provide information that he is of sound character and reasonable competency. When, for whatever reason, the scene around him ceases to provide this information about him, he is likely to feel compelled to act to control the undesired impression of himself he may have made.”

A break-down of the performance can disrupt all three.

Actors engage in “impression management” to project desired selves and to resist disturbances to their performances.

“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.” (p. 367)

Some dramaturgical considerations

Setting, props, costumes, etc.

Frontstage and backstage

Impressions given (what is said) and impressions given-off (gestures, expressions, etc.)

Practices for dealing with interactional mistakes:
- Preventive practices: before the mistake
- Corrective practices: after the mistake
- Defensive practices: your own mistake
- Protective practices: someone else’s mistakes