

# Erving Goffman: Sociologist of Drama

Edith W. King

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## Abstract

This article is devoted to the timeless and insightful writings of Erving Goffman. Goffman embedded the use of language and his observations of people in the metaphor of the theatre and drama. He draws on individuals' performances, dramatic realizations, and role expectations in his works. His brilliant books, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) are classics in sociological thought. He delved into the intricacies of people's attempts to role play and to hide their faults and failures, both physical and psychological. This article gives an overview of Goffman's writings. Then I apply his dramaturgic sociological concepts to early elementary school classrooms and to the educational scene.

**Index terms**— Erving Goffman's theories, drama sociology, qualitative research in early childhood education.

## 1 I. Introduction

Erving Goffman was retiring, publicity shy, and standoffish in public situations. His career as a sociologist is better appreciated when taking into consideration that during the sixty years of his life span from his birth in 1922 to his death in 1982, the U.S. went through "the Great Depression," World War II, detonation of the atomic bomb, and the arrival of computers and globalization. Goffman attended the University of Chicago where he received his doctorate. He also was awarded an honorary doctorate of law from the University of Manitoba in 1976. (Goffman was born in Canada and later moved to the U.S.). Other honors included: a Guggenheim fellowship, the Mead-Cooley Award in social psychology, and a doctorate of Hebrew Literature from the University of Chicago. Goffman's academic career ranged over positions at the University of Chicago, University of California-Berkeley, and at the University of Pennsylvania, as Professor of Anthropology and Sociology from 1968 to his death in 1982. He held the prestigious position as 73rd president of the American Sociological Association in 1982.

By the late 1970's his research and publications had reached national prominence and he was a widely sought after personality. He was known for shooing off reporters and cameras when at high profile professional meetings or conferences. At the American Sociological Association national session in San Francisco in September, 1982, where he gave the presidential address as the 73rd president of the Association, several reporters approached him with their cameras and he dove into the nearest elevator turning his back on all.

Sadly just two months later, I heard about his death from stomach cancer and I learned he had been suffering for some time. At just age sixty the social scientific community lost one of its greatest. Erving Goffman was truly a sociological innovator.

## 2 II. Goffman on Content and Style in Language

We impress others by what we say; and how we say it. Usually we would not think of how we say something as a form of language, rather this is considered the "style" of the delivery. With deep insight, Erving Goffman, suggests that what people commonly consider to be style is actually another manifestation of language. Goffman asserts style is a form of language that serves the purpose of validating the content of the message or utterance. The illustration that follows makes clear what Goffman means when he refers to the validating properties of style in human performances. Examine the difference between a performance of Hamlet by the late famous Shakespearean actor, Laurence Olivier, and one by a not particularly talented high school student. There is certainly not

a difference of content. Both individuals speak the same words or lines from identical scripts. However, the performance of Olivier is believable. It impresses us as authentic. It appears to be a valid characterization. The performance of a student may appear lifeless, dull, artificial, stilted, stiff, or unreal. We know that the high school student is not "really" Hamlet, but Olivier can "con" us into accepting that he is Hamlet. The difference rests in the style of the performance. Goffman points out that if style can communicate a sense of validity, then it must be seen in itself as a form of language. Moreover, its importance must not be overlooked. A lack of control over the language of style may mean the difference between having one's message or performance accepted by others or having it rejected.

Goffman's approach to interpersonal interaction and rapport, based in symbolic interaction theory, was originally developed to view people in everyday social interaction. He employed the theatrical metaphor or the dramaturgic approach in describing people as they present themselves and their activities to others. Goffman pointed out that people employ strategies to guide and control the impressions they create. His theatrical or drama model of sociology was built upon detailed and painstaking research and observation of social customs in many regions of the United States, Britain and Europe. It is appropriate to highlight some of the terminology that this sociologist developed to examine groups of people and their social customs. The following definitions of several of the terms and concepts used by Goffman are derived from his now classic book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

Performance—"refers to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his/her continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (p. 22).

Front—"that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. It is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during the performance" (p. 22).

Setting—"a standard part of front involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the human action played out before, within, or upon it" (p.

### 3 22).

Personal Front—"refers to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer; the insignia office or rank; clothing; sex; age; racial characteristics, size and looks, posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and; the like" (p. 24).

Audience—the observers who view the performance.

Continuing in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman uses the term "symptomatic range of action" to describe that language of style. By this he means that certain actions are symptomatic of a valid performance. For example, an astute and competent instructor who comes to class the first day with trembling hands may lose his or her audience because students will see this as symptomatic of nervousness or stress. Consider the situation in which a person may control content but lacks mastery over symptomatic action. Such a person, despite control over content, may not be able to disguise ineptness with regard to symptomatic impressions. A specific and actual case in point was the lectures given by the noted American economist and social analyst, Thorstein Veblen, who originated the classic label "conspicuous consumption" to characterize the American public. Although his brilliance was widely recognized, and although hundreds of students flocked to his classes, the end of the semester would find the classroom nearly empty. Students would abandon his courses by the hundreds. Veblen's lack of concern for classroom oratorical devices eventually proved more than his audience could bear.

## 4 III. Cynical and Sincere Performances

### 5 Goffman

shows us, perhaps more sympathetically than any other observer of human activities, that there is a large element of phoniness in all human interaction. We pose, as it were, behind a variety of masks used to frighten, intimidate, implore, awe, beg, or otherwise elicit from others the kinds of reactions we seek. On some occasions, people do this selfconsciously; at other times, they may be unaware of the extent to which we use these devices. Goffman calls consciously manipulative conduct a "cynical" type of performance, whereas an unconscious use of manipulative devices produces actions that are "sincere." It is worth noting that this places sincerity and cynicism within the subjective awareness or in the mind of the actor. It is impossible to detect it from outside. For example, a cynical and devious male may consciously and knowingly act ineptly in order to convince the female he is trying to impress that he is sincere. A sincere man, unknowingly, may act in a similar manner. The performances are virtually identical; the difference is subjective. Goffman's concern with the subjective differences in a given action highlights the significance of the performance itself.

## 6 IV. Dramatic Realization

Some kinds of social performances are defined in such a manner as to convince audiences easily and quickly of the reality of the performances. The person is readily seen as being what he or she is trying to appear to be. Moreover, the performer is able to do this easily. Other kinds of performances do not easily dramatize themselves.

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In such situations a person may, even though doing the work or whatever is appropriate to the role, have difficulty impressing others that this is so. Goffman call this "dramatic realization." He offers the example of the medical nurse and the surgical nurse as an illustration. The duties of the surgical nurse are such that the performance is quickly accepted. As the nurse stands beside the surgeon, masked and attentive, no one is doubtful about the work performance. The case of the medical nurse is different. In this instance, the nurse may come to the door of a patient's room and casually converse with the patient. While conversing, the nurse may be observing changes in the patient's skin color, breathing, voice, and so on. Each of these observations may provide pertinent information about the progress of the patient's condition. Even so, the non-dramatic character of these actions may cause the patient to conclude that the nurse is simply "messaging around" or "goofing off." Goffman explains that a "dilemma of expression" can develop. The dilemma rests on the following horns: (1) If the non-dramatic task is adhered to exactly, it may result in the actor's being rejected by the audience; however, (2) if dramatic elements are added to the task in order to retain the Volume XV Issue I Version I Erving Goffman: Sociologist of Drama audience, they will interfere with the proper conduct of the task. Thus, the performer is required to create a balance between impressing people and getting the job done.

V.

## 7 Role Expectations

Any performance requires at least a general conception of what is expected of the performer. This is referred to as "role expectation." Goffman suggests that role expectations may be "realistic" or "idealized." The difference between a realistic and an idealized conception of a role seems to hinge on whether or not the conception derives from the experience of an "insider" or the credulity of the "outsider." Again, in *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman describes the example of what he means by "idealization," when he recalls how the college girls he knew played down their intelligence, skills, and pivotal knowledge when in the presence of their boyfriends. The women allowed their boyfriends to tediously explain things to them that they already knew. Additionally, they concealed proficiency in mathematics from their less able consorts and they were adept at losing ping-pong games just before the ending.

(Goffman, 1959: 39). For instance, the following anecdote describes how young children, early in their lives, internalize gender stereotypes and biases thereby conforming to role expectations. This scenario occurred during observations in a first grade classroom (six-year-olds) in an elementary school in the American Southwest. The class consisted of ten girls and twelve boys. Because the teacher, Ms. R., recently attended a workshop in gender equity training, she proudly tells the observer that she now makes concerted attempts to acknowledge both the boys and girls in the group with equal attention. However, how Ms. R gives out this attention to her students is most revealing of the subtle nature of gender bias and role expectations as Goffman has observed:

Three girls were talking together in the back of classroom. Suddenly Ms. R. shouted above their voices, saying "No Beauty Shop talk now girls!" The girls immediately stopped talking and turned their full attention on Ms. R. Somewhat disconcerted and confused the observer asked one of the girls to explain what Ms. R. meant by the term, "Beauty Shop talk." The child responded to the inquiry by stating, "Ms. R. tells us that girls gossip and talk in beauty shops and that is all right, but in school and in the classroom, girls have to be quiet and listen to the teacher."

Hence the traditional stereotype that if girls (women) are talking together it must be just females' idle chatter and so the myth is reinforced that if women or girls talk to each other, it can only be gossip about silly, meaningless events. On the contrary, when the teacher, Ms. R saw boys talking to each other, she did not challenge them, assuming that they must be helping each other with the assignment, and so must be discussing "important" academic information. These daily classroom events, detailed in the journal of a graduate student in an educational sociology seminar, demonstrate how young children are socialized by significant adults early in their lives, reinforcing the gender stereotypes of the broader society. (King:1999) Goffman's concept of idealization may work in the other direction. College students who complicate their prose because they think intellectuals write in an incomprehensible manner are attempting idealization. The housewife who usually prepares simple meals for her family but presents guests with an elaborate feast is indulging in a form of role idealization. In such cases, the performer expects to lead a credulous audience into an acceptance of the performer on the basis of the performer's conception of how the audience feels the role should be played. The relationship of idealization to performances is significant, because it forces us to recognize that human social activity involves (1) our own understanding of how our role should be played; (2) the conceptions others have of how the role should be played; and (3) the possibility of discrepancies between these conceptions. In regard to the latter, severe discrepancies will result in performances that are bizarre and ineffective.

Above all, Goffman probes deeply so that what is considered a "real" performance has elements identical to those involved in the phony performance. This leads to new ways to thinking about the essential nature of humanity. When seen in this larger conception of human nature that Goffman reveals, it will not permit us to define humanity simply in terms of the trappings people use to frighten and awe each other.

## 8 VI. The Problems of Stigma

Goffman's symbolic interaction theory is brought out by the unique treatment he gives to the problems experienced by people suffering from stigmata of different kinds. Goffman defines "stigma" in his often referenced volume, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* in the following way: While the stranger is present before us, evidence can arise of his possessing an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind-in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our mind from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one. Such an attribute is a stigma. (Goffman, 1963: 2-3)

It is important to recognize that stigmata are not purely physical defects-even when the manifestation of the stigma is, perhaps a scar that runs from an individual's ear to the mouth, resulting in a twisted, leering expression. A stigma must be viewed always in terms of a language of relationships. Our reactions to a person possessing a stigma are influenced by the common theories we rely on regarding the nature of that stigma. Goffman points out that people use specific stigma terms such as "cripple," "bastard," and "moron" in our daily discourse as a source of metaphor and imagery, yet often without giving thought to the original meaning ??Goffman, 1963: 5).

In his memorable book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Goffman extends his theories of the analogy of the theatre or the dramaturgic to those in society who are shunned, disdained, and as Goffman labels them, discredited. He presents the concept of sigma as an attribute a person holds that is deeply discrediting. A person with a stigma is not quite human. Hence the individual's performance becomes blemished by the stigma. Goffman writes:

Three grossly different types of stigma may be mentioned. First there are abominations of bodyvarious physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will, domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality (emphasis this author), unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behavior. Finally, there are the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion, these being stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family.

(Goffman, 1963: 3) Those who do not depart negatively from particular expectations Goffman labels as "normals." In an amusing footnote he comments on how questionable individuals such as criminals attempt to prove their claim to normalcy by citing how they are so devoted to their families that they spend every Christmas and Thanksgiving with them.

Applying Goffman's theory of stigmatized, blemished, or discredited individuals to youngsters who others have labeled "homos," "fags," "queers" and so on, or to the bully, is useful. Goffman's conceptions of stigma and the management of "spoiled identity" in contemporary societies give us new insights into the individual's plight. A child with a stigma experiences a unique pattern of development in life. Goffman calls this development the "moral career." In this case the stigmatized may reach a turning point where they can no longer be protected by their family and friends. Suddenly, as the child tries to build social relationships with others, the "undesirable" attributes which he or she possesses become evident. The first encounter of nonacceptance by peers may come in the school setting. According to Goffman, all of those who are stigmatized have an individual pattern of life development, a "moral career" involving their particular stigma, which in this instance might be that of sexual orientation or that those who are rearing the boy or girl are parents of the same sex. Before this career begins, the child is protected by the family. This condition could also be applied to the bully or the victim of the bully.

Goffman sees the term stigma in the light of two perspectives-the stigmatized individual who perceives that being different is evident to those with whom he or she is interacting; and the stigmatized individual who assumes that the stigma or blemish of character is not known or necessarily obvious to the other. He refers to this first group as the "discredited" and to the second group as the "discreditable." These labels fit the situation of the homosexual or bisexual person in our society and can be applied in the situation of children, as well. In this case, regardless of whether the stigmatized child is "discreditable" or "discredited," he or she must decide what plan of action to follow in order to obscure, or at least minimize, being different. According to Goffman, there are several responses that the stigmatized might use to alter the situation. First, the child may make a direct attempt to challenge the label-"gay," "homo," etc. or the child may take up unrealistic, unconventional behavior that breaks with the stigmatizing label.

## 9 VII. Goffman's Theory and the Drama of the Classroom

The analogy of life as a stage with individuals playing out their roles as actors in a setting dates back to Shakespeare, and perhaps even before his immortal rhetoric that all the world's a stage and all the people merely players upon it. Occasionally in the literature, teachers have been referred to as actors, playing out their dramas in the classroom. Life in classrooms has been the topic and the theme of many films, novels, and plays. Some high school and college teachers, have developed a reputation for dramatic histrionics in the classroom, as though they were truly "on stage" giving a performance. Sometimes teachers of young children employ a theatrical stance when telling or reading stories to children. The whole tradition and art of the storyteller has been an integral part of early childhood learning for centuries. Rare in the literature on teaching methodology and practice, however, is an examination of the mundane, day-to-day experience of teachers and students in the metaphor of a theatrical performance. To develop such an analysis it is useful to have a framework of concepts or terms to categorize and analyze just what is going on between individuals.

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Here the work and writings of Erving Goffman becomes a pertinent prototype for examining life in classrooms of young children.

Goffman's theories were mainly developed to view adults in everyday social interaction. His metaphors of the theater and of the dramatic help us to examine people as they present themselves and their activities to others and try to guide and control the impressions they create. He sees the individual as employing certain techniques to sustain the performance, just as the actor presents a character to an audience. To apply this unique theory to the everyday life of teachers and students in early childhood classrooms, it is useful to describe the labels or terms that the sociologist has developed to examine groups of people and their social customs. The following definitions of terms and "concepts" as used by Goffman have been taken from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), one of his most stimulating writings. These labels for everyday behaviors and their definitions will help readers to grasp the power and insightful analysis of human behavior offered in this theatrical model.

I begin with the most obvious term, "the performance." In this application of the theatrical model a performance refers to all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by continuous presence before a particular set of observers and that has some influence on the observers. Next follows the idea of a "front," that part of the individual's performance that defines the situation for those who observe the performance. It is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during the performance. The performance takes place in a setting, a standard part of the front involving furniture, decor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the human action played out before, within, or upon it. Human beings put forth a personal front, which refers to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer: clothing, gender, ethnic characteristics, age, size and looks, posture, speech patterns, bodily gestures, facial expressions, insignia of office or rank, and the like.

Additional terms in this framework of the theater include "dramatic realization" and most importantly, "audience." Dramatic realization is used to describe how the individual typically infuses the performance with signs that dramatically highlight and confirm what might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. The "audience" is the observers who view the performance. If the individual's activity is to become significant to others-the audience, then the individual must mobilize activity so that it will express during the interaction what the individual wishes to convey.

How can this theatrical model be applied to teachers and students, and more specifically to education in the early childhood setting? I begin with the performance. The teacher is providing a performance in the classroom when he or she is engaged in the activity of teaching, during a period of time-the school session. Further, the teacher is in the continued presence of a set of observers, the students, and influences their behavior. To continue the analogy, the teacher (the performer) constructs a front that incorporates a personal front and is enacted within a setting. The setting in which the teacher plays out the performance is a classroom whose decor or physical layout includes walls, bulletin and chalk boards, furniture-the teacher's desk, the smaller, child-sized tables and chairs; the bookshelves, cupboards, and closets stocked with materials; the housekeeping center or play house; the games area, science corner, and so on. These elements have been carefully arranged by the teacher.

The teacher's personal front consists of far more maturity in age, greater size and strength, greater wisdom and experience than the young students before whom the performance takes place. The teacher's personal front might also include the dress, mannerisms, style of speech and expressions that have been cultivated for this performance, the instruction of young children. When we think of teachers of young children we invariably picture a woman with a sweet smile and a gentle demeanor. Often a given social front becomes stereotyped and institutionalized. This expectation of front, social or personal, of the teacher of young children is certainly characteristic of American society. When men choose to become teachers for groups of children under eight years of age, they must establish a personal front that is part of a new performance in the society, while also counteracting a standing stereotypical role, the female kindergarten teacher.

I have applied Erving Goffman's concepts of the performance, front, setting, and personal front to teachers of young children. Now let us see how his term dramatic realization fits into life in classrooms. Dramatic realization has been described as a technique that the performer uses to infuse the performance with dramatic highlights, emphasizing what might otherwise remain obscure. One has to underscore the activity to impress on observers or audience aspects of the performance. One describes how students try to impress teachers by being extremely attentive. Students rivet their eyes on the teacher, exhaust themselves playing the attentive role, and end up by not actually learning anything.

To illustrate dramatic realization with the teacher giving the performance, I recall the early childhood teacher who kept a mirror in a stand on her piano. The mirror is arranged at an appropriate angle so the teacher can see her four-year-olds even though her back is turned to them while she plays the piano. As the children sing and request numbers, the teacher merely glances in the mirror to see whom to call on next. This teacher has developed the technique of actually being able to survey her pupils even when her back is turned to them. As Goffman describes dramatic realization, if the activity is to become significant to others, the performer must mobilize the actions during the performance to heighten what is intended to be portrayed. To the observer this clever teacher provides dramatic realization of the role of the young child's teacher by being ever watchful, even when her back is turned, to the needs, reactions, and feelings of her students.

Others Join in the Performance: The performer can function alone or be a member of a troupe or cast of

players. An example comes from proper etiquette in business settings. One usually addresses co-workers in the office or one's administrative assistant by "Mr." or "Ms" when outsiders are present, although everyone in the office may be on a first name basis during the daily routine of activities. The school is also a type of business setting. Teachers greet each other by their first names in the classroom, the hall, the office, or the teachers' lounge when no children are within hearing. Yet, if a child appears on the scene, it constitutes a breach of etiquette to refer to Miss Green, the art teacher, as "Blanche." One way to refer to a member of your clique or particular group on large school faculty is to refer to the individual always by his or her first name when that individual is not present but is mentioned in the conversation. These small, but really significant actions reveal the subtleties of the "performance team," who are considered the members, and who are labeled outsiders or the audience for the team.

Performance teams are flexible and the cast of characters in the troupe can shift and change. At times the teacher and the students become a team, whereas the outsiders or the audience can consist of parents, other teachers, supervisors, the principal, or other administrators. I am not referring to the traditional school performance situation, where parents are invited to the kindergarten to see the rhythm band play several numbers just before Christmas. Rather, let us look at a more subtle but commonplace situation in the public school setting. A teacher new to the system must be evaluated by superiors. It is known that the coordinator, supervisor, or principal will be coming around to observe the classroom. The teacher allies the students to perform in the manner that will be expected by the evaluator, even to the extent, in some cases, that the threat of the teacher's classroom evaluation is used as a means of discipline for the pupils in the classroom. This is especially effective with young children. The teacher may say, "Oh, you know Mr. Brown, our principal, is coming in one of these days and he doesn't like to see messy tables and noisy children." And, when the principal does arrive for a brief inspection, the cast of characters, children and teacher alike, are alerted to provide him with the performance he seems to be expecting.

What is being said here of the new teacher on the job, can also be used to characterize the student teacher, perhaps even more so. For example, in the setting of the open pod-style school, with 150 to 200 children in a large, carpeted space sectioned off by many styles of dividers, the supervisor can observe the candidate to be evaluated in a very casual and unobtrusive manner. Yet five- and six-year-olds in this setting, may look up from their reading or their projects and remark, "Here comes the lady from the university to see if Miss Blue is teaching us all right." The children were alerted to the performance that was expected when the "outsider" arrived, by a member of their team, their student teacher.

#### VIII. Regions: The Setting for the Performance and its Staging

In the traditional elementary school regions are usually designated such as, "Room 102" or "The First Grade." Regions can more easily be delineated in the traditional elementary school classroom, than in the traditional kindergarten or open space areas of elementary schools. Goffman's writings adroitly denote a "front" and a "back region," where the team performs. In this theatrical model both the traditional school and the more innovative open space school can become settings with front and back regions. The front region is referred to as the place where the performance is given, while the back region is a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression, fostered by the performance, is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course. The teachers' lounge would eminently qualify for the example of a back region. It is here that, at times, emotions are fully expressed, from sobbing declamations of failure to the exhilaration successful teaching can bring. Teachers of young children often feel the fatigue of being "on stage" for hours on end. In some situations, the elementary school teacher's "day" can equal six to seven hours of unrelieved duty with children. Yet, the teachers' lounge provides the backstage area where the adult can relax from the performance.

Do the children in the school have such a "back" region? The playground or outdoors sometimes functions in this way, but often this area is but another sector of the front region for teachers and students alike. Then we wonder why young children in the school setting become so restless and uncontrollable at the end of the day. There is really no back region for them. They often have no place to let go and relax from pressures of the performance in school! It should not be construed that this theatrical model for examining classrooms of young children and explaining human interactions is wholly negative, sarcastic, or deprecating. Rather, this type of analysis focuses on trying to find explanations for the behavior of children and adults. These were, among many others, the purposes and goals of Erving Goffman, in his development of this approach to understanding human behavior and the motivations behind it.

## 10 IX. Goffman the Social Scientist and Humanist

Whether it was a person with a stigma, or a normal individual coping with a common problem in everyday life, Goffman concentrated on how people manage the impressions they try to convey to others. He was not, in the usual meaning of the term, a "scientist." His work does not rely on elaborate measurements. His major works are not based on questionnaires or even structured interviews. He is not at all hesitant to make use of literary examples if they help illustrate a concept or idea. Yet it would be a mistake to discount Goffman as a scientist. There is in his writing a more dispassionate and unbiased reporting of human events than is to be found in many studies more heavily armored with quantitative data and statistical analysis. Goffman's methods, which consist largely of careful observation combined with extensive scholarship, flow from his general conception of human conduct. Human activities, for Goffman, are not a series of discrete actions that result from biologically

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348 derived urges or drives. Nor is such activity a manifestation of an inner condition like "personality." Instead,  
349 human actions are distinctly complex and consist for the most part of an elaborate progression of symbolic  
350 performances. This conception of humanity forces us to see our conduct as though it were a work of art. People  
351 are artists-con artists, Goffman might suggest, but nonetheless artists.

352 Goffman stands back and observes, through the perspectives of science, the artful performances of people. The  
353 effect is powerful. The large following his work still enjoys in sociological and psychological circles, as well as  
354 the growing ranks of qualitative researchers, is a result of the fact that he brings together the synthetic powers  
355 of the humanistic artist with the analytic and objective powers of the contemporary social scientist. To read  
356 Goffman is to be brought directly and cleverly to a perception of people as role players and manipulators of props,  
357 costumes, gestures, and words. This sociologist is able to suggest, indirectly, the injustices that such role playing  
358 can produce-as when, for example, we deny a person status as a warm and intelligent human being because he or  
359 she is deformed and dwarflike. Nevertheless, if Goffman is able to penetrate into the most subtle irrationalities  
360 of human conduct, he simultaneously is generous in the extent to which his conception of humanity embraces  
361 all of us. His writing asserts that no person is more human than others, but that one person may be able to  
362 give a certain kind of performance better than another. Goffman finds people caught up in myriad con games;  
363 at the same time, the objective and cold vision of this social scientist upholds in a startling way one of the most  
364 sympathetic of human values-the fundamental equality of all human beings. <sup>1</sup>

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