

# 1 Erving Goffman: Sociologist of Drama

2 Edith W. King

3 *Received: 8 April 2015 Accepted: 30 April 2015 Published: 15 May 2015*

4

---

## 5 **Abstract**

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

15

---

16 **Index terms**— ervin goffman's theories, drama sociology, qualitative research in early childhood education.

## 17 **1 I. Introduction**

18 Erving Goffman was retiring, publicity shy, and standoffish in public situations. His career as a sociologist is better  
19 appreciated when taking into consideration that during the sixty years of his life span from his birth in 1922 to  
20 his death in 1982, the U.S. went through "the Great Depression," World War II, detonation of the atomic bomb,  
21 and the arrival of computers and globalization. Goffman attended the University of Chicago where he received  
22 his doctorate. He also was awarded an honorary doctorate of law from the University of Manitoba in 1976.  
23 (Goffman was born in Canada and later moved to the U.S.). Other honors included: a Guggenheim fellowship,  
24 the Mead-Cooley Award in social psychology, and a doctorate of Hebrew Literature from the University of  
25 Chicago. Goffman's academic career ranged over positions at the University of Chicago, University of California-  
26 Berkeley, and at the University of Pennsylvania, as Professor of Anthropology and Sociology from 1968 to his  
27 death in 1982. He held the prestigious position as 73rd president of the American Sociological Association in  
28 1982

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

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

## 37 **2 II. Goffman on Content and Style in Language**

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

## 6 IV. DRAMATIC REALIZATION

---

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

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

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

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

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

### 69 3 22).

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

73 Audience—the observers who view the performance.

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

## 86 4 III. Cynical and Sincere Performances

### 87 5 Goffman

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

## 99 6 IV. Dramatic Realization

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

---

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

117 V.

## 118 7 Role Expectations

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

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

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

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

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

161 **8 VI. The Problems of Stigma**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

211 **9 VII. Goffman's Theory and the Drama of the Classroom**

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

---

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

225 Goffman's theories were mainly developed to view adults in everyday social interaction. His metaphors of the  
226 theater and of the dramatic help us to examine people as they present themselves and their activities to others  
227 and try to guide and control the impressions they create. He sees the individual as employing certain techniques  
228 to sustain the performance, just as the actor presents a character to an audience. To apply this unique theory to  
229 the everyday life of teachers and students in early childhood classrooms, it is useful to describe the labels or terms  
230 that the sociologist has developed to examine groups of people and their social customs. The following definitions  
231 of terms and "concepts" as used by Goffman have been taken from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*  
232 (1959), one of his most stimulating writings. These labels for everyday behaviors and their definitions will help  
233 readers to grasp the power and insightful analysis of human behavior offered in this theatrical model.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

338 **10 IX. Goffman the Social Scientist and Humanist**

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

---

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>



---

365 [ Erving Goffman on the World Wide Web] , *Erving Goffman on the World Wide Web*  
366 [Asylums ()] , Asylums . 1961. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.  
367 [Encounters ()] , Encounters . 1961. Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.  
368 [Additional References] *Additional References*,  
369 [Behavior in Public Places ()] *Behavior in Public Places*, (New York) 1963. Free Press.  
370 [Erving\_Goffman: This wikipedia site gives some biography about Goffman, lists his major works, and provides some other inks  
371 *Erving\_Goffman: This wikipedia site gives some biography about Goffman, lists his major works, and provides*  
372 *some other inks to his writings,* <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/>  
373 [Gender Advertisements ()] *Gender Advertisements*, (Cambridge, MA) 1979. Harvard University Press.  
374 [Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior ()] *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*,  
375 (Chicago; Aldine) 1967.  
376 [l: Provides a biography and bibliography of major writings and articles related to his life and work] *l: Provides a biography and bibliography of major writings and articles related to his life and work*, <http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/goffmanbio.htm>  
377  
378  
379 [King ()] *Looking Into the Lives of Children*, Edith W King . 1999. Albert Park, Australia: James Nicholas  
380 Publishers.  
381 [Cuzzort and King ()] *Social Thought Into the 21st Century*. Ft, R P Cuzzort , Edith W King . 2002. Worth,  
382 TX; Harcourt.  
383 [Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity ()] *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ) 1963. Prentice-Hall.  
384  
385 [The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life ()] *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959. Garden City, NY:  
386 Doubleday: Anchor Books version. (first published as a monograph in the Social Sciences Research Centre  
387 at the University of Edinburgh in 1956)  
388 [This site contains brief excerpts from Goffman's major works] *This site contains brief excerpts from Goffman's*  
389 *major works*, <http://www.mdx.ac.uk/WWW/STUDY/xgof.htm>