# GOFFMAN'S SELF AND THE DRAMATURGICAL MODEL OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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*Résumé :* *Plus de 50 ans après la théorie selon laquelle la vie sociale est une immense scène de théâtre où chacun joue d'innombrables rôles, Erving Goffman reste tout aussi pertinent. Son génie réside dans sa capacité à trouver de l'ordre dans un monde apparemment improvisé et aléatoire. Les métaphores utilisées font de la lecture de ses œuvres un réel plaisir et lèvent le rideau des interactions sociales de manière simple (pas simpliste) et directe. La théorie de l'auto-présentation de Goffman est une métaphore de l'individu qui « performe » dans la société. Au-delà des étiquettes, sa perspective doit être considérée comme une théorie générale des interactions face à face qui peut être utilisée pour interpréter tout changement social. Dans le monde des sciences sociales, la méthode d'investigation proposée doit être considérée comme l'une des nombreuses possibilités d'analyse. L'émergence des nouvelles technologies de communication et la naissance des mondes virtuels ont permis l'émergence d'espaces de refuge pour l'individu contemporain. Il n'est pas clair s'il s'agit de scènes ou de backstage pour les acteurs sociaux, mais il est certain que dans l'analyse de la « vie quotidienne » en réalité virtuelle, le modèle dramaturgique est une méthode nécessaire. En fait, c'est dans cette capacité, d'être toujours actuel et universellement valable pour l'une des communautés humaines, que réside la vraie valeur de la théorie sociologique d'Erving Goffman.*

*Mots-clés :* *soi, modèle dramaturgique, scène, coulisses, autres, public.*

### Introduction. Who is Erving Goffman?

According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sociology (2003: 260), Erving Goffman is "the most influential micro sociologist of the 1960s and 1970s". After his death (1982), the word "Goffman" became synonymous with a "very distinct attitude and analytical position toward the social world" (Smith, 2006: 1).

Considered to be one of the main representatives of symbolic interactionism, although he constantly refused to be labeled in these terms (Lohisse, 2002: 153), Erving Goffman left the impression of a nonconformist researcher who violated almost all the rules of conventional methodology. His personal approach to the social makes it somewhat difficult to fit into a current of thought:

"Sometimes he is known to have developed a distinct school of symbolic interactionism, other times he is seen as a functionalist of the micro level, of concern, characteristic of the function of rituals (especially speech) in everyday life." (Marshall, 2003: 260)

Regardless of the label assigned to it, it should be noted that perhaps the strongest influence of his entire career is exerted by what we call in the sociological literature the "Chicago School". Among the personalities who marked Goffman's theoretical vision are symbolic interactionist Everett Hughes and Herbert Blumer, and the New Yorkers Lloyd Warner, Edward Shils, and Edward Banfield (Marshall, 2003: 260). The idea is that "everyday behaviors are less imposed on people through social structures of a kind of social determinism and more negotiated by each, in a kind of permanent improvisation" (Lohisse, 2002: 152). Goffman sees sociology in terms of face-to-face interactions governed by informal norms that are "here and now". Everything is for him reduced to the formula, "Not men and their moments. Rather moments and their men" (Goffman, 1967: 4).

The adoption of the interactionist-symbolic perspective marked not only the evolution of Goffman's scientific career but even of sociology itself. His work has made the Chicago school one of the most prolific directions of social research. In the paradigm of interpretive sociology initiated by his predecessors Max Weber and George Herbet Mead, Goffman "stimulated the emergence and development of ethnomethodology and sociological phenomenology, contributed to the assertion of methodological individualism and enshrined the qualitative approach as preeminent in contemporary sociology" (Vlăsceanu, 2003).

Even if everything "leaves the impression of an immediate discovery of the ideas displayed", even if everything seems simple and transparent, there are depths to which you can only access "going forward and returning to reading". These are the reasons that led Lazăr Vlăsceanu to say about Goffman that "it is opener to new ways of theorizing, but impossible to imitate or even continue, as if everything had closed in its own openings" (2003: 21).

## 1.  Presentation of Self in Everyday Life and Dramaturgical Model

Erving Goffman's first study on the Scottish Shetland Islands is the result of "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life". With this analysis of local farmers' lives, sociological research shifts to an individual level of social theory. Referring to the way in which individual actors create, maintain, defend, and often increase the power of their social identities through the use of scenery, subterfuge, and scenery in a world seen as a huge theater stage, Goffman is actually introducing a new model of investigation of social reality, the dramaturgical model.

Such a methodological perspective involves first identifying the relationships between the many teams that "perform"[1] at a given time in a community and aims to describe the techniques of impression management and identify the main problems of impression management in the social structure investigated.

"By systematically developing the idea that the world is a theater, he presents contacts and relationships between individuals as rituals in which the mechanisms of

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[1] "A performance involves all the activity of a particular participant, given a particular occasion, and which serves to influence, in any way, any of the other participants." (Goffman, 2003: 43)

identification, obedience, or recognition listen to an implicit grammar." (Baylon & Mignot, 2000: 263).

At the heart of his entire approach is the concept of interaction, and in his analysis, Goffman uses the analysis grid of his dramaturgical model.

In the Dramaturgical Analysis of Social Interaction, Paul Hare and Herbert Blumberg inventory the main elements that are the subject of a dramaturgical analysis. The area of action of the protagonists is divided into two parts, BACKSTAGE and STAGE.

The backstage area is a place where actors are preparing to interpret their roles. This is a place where the actors repeat how to produce special effects in order to influence the audience. This is where the setting is arranged, the costume is distributed, and the work of those who make up the so-called backstage staff is elaborated, "Here illusions and impressions are built in sight" (Goffman, 2003: 135).

The stage ("front region") is the place where the actor is meeting with his audience. The scene is the place where the actor makes efforts to cultivate the appearance of his character. In addition, there are the so-called OFFSTAGE areas where the people who organized the activity (producers) and those who usually give directions for action (directors) remain hidden from the audience.

The center of the paradigm is dominated by Actors and Co-Actors. It is the place where everyone plays their scores in which they perform "different scenarios, in different settings and for different categories of audience" (Stănciulescu, 1997: 123) to give birth to a character. The limits between which the role can and must be played are three in number, the normative side (ideal rules of conduct), the typical side (attributes and qualities that are currently associated with the person) and the interpretation (refers to the interaction during which the individual plays its role) (Goffman, 2004).

According with Ogien, Goffman's operationalization of the concept of role has led him to make three statements:

> "1. the one who occupies a certain place in interaction must conform to what he believes are the expectations of others regarding the role he plays by you;
> 2. the role acquires real consistency in the conditions of a given activity and in the specific interpretation given to it;
> 3. the role exists independently of the individual who fulfills and interprets it." (Ogien, 2002: 123-124)

Of all these constraints, the Actor and his Audience have to outline the boundaries of their own SELF (the individual characteristics that each person brings to the role). At any point in his performance, the Actor may benefit from help from additional players (OTHERS) who may team up to help him stage the roles played in front of the audience (AUDIENCE).

The immediately perceptible image of the interpretation of a role is that of the "face", a personal image offered to the audience that betrays the social values of the performer and is transmitted to defend their own territory (avoiding the negative image). Behavior, attire, body language, manner of speaking, and the way one presents oneself to others are observable elements of the "Face" concept, elements that allow us to follow the complex ways in which a character manages his or her identity. In fact, Goffman's complexity leads to an equally complex process of managing impressions.

According to Goffman's analysis, in our daily performances, "dramatic dysfunctions" (involuntary incidents, inopportune intrusions, faux pas, and scenes)

inevitably occur. The use of preventive strategies to avoid incidents, those of protection that aim to protect the image of the other or those who seek to repair an incident are the recommendations that the American sociologist offers us for each of us to make impression management an art of interpersonal communication.

## 2. Erving Goffman, "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" and the critique

In 1988, Winklin called Erving Goffman "an incorrigible intellectual do-it-yourselfer and heavy consumer of ephemeral concepts" (Baylon & Mignot, 2000: 264). It is one of the labels under which sociologists believe that the world described by Goffman is too cynical, too marked by a lack of good intentions, and too much a function of personal desires. Gouldner (1967) says that Goffman trivialized the sociological project by focusing on impression management tactics while Johnson Williams (1986) accepts the negative social focus proposed by Goffman but reproaches him that he did not indicate ways to correct the identified things. (Hammond, 2009: 5)

Referring to this issue, Manning (1992: 6) responds to critics by referring to traditional anthropologists. If the latter have provided the societies in which we live with models of knowledge of the human being in relation to other societies, Erving Goffman has the merit of showing us all how complex the society in which we live is. The good part is that some of the "bad" things that have happened in human communities have been revealed to us, and now all we have to do is find solutions.

Another important critique is directed at his dramaturgical model because the method used does not meet one of the rigours of scientific research, fidelity / reliability (Lemert, 1997). The ambiguity of his sources, the avoidance of field work, the approach to an essayistic style and the lack of systematic character of his writings strengthened his image as a researcher who violated all the rules of conventional methodology. (Marshall, 2003: 260). The success of Goffman's method seems to have only one explanation for his critics, "it breathed new life into the ancient *all the world's a stage metaphor*" (Smith, 2006: 42), and the analogy of theater is considered an inappropriate way of analyzing the world we live in.

Although some critics consider Goffman's statement in Everyday Life to be cynical, "it cannot be said, of course, that the whole world is a theater scene, but the essential elements that distinguish it from a scene are not easy to specify." (2003: 96), it should be noted that the American sociologist never considered the association between society and the scene in a literal sense. He "uses theatrical performance as a metaphor; it is not a question of actually identifying the social world with a theater, but of capitalizing on the explanatory powers of a simple analogy." (Stănciulescu, 1996: 144).

The dramaturgical perspective of interpreting the social world must be seen as an arbitrary option equal to all the others that exist or that will appear from now on. Such views prompted Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu to appreciate Goffman's work. While the former suggests that Goffman, "the least systematic of sociologists, was in fact a systematic social theorist", the latter considers his method one of the most original and rare ways of doing sociology (Lemert, 1997). The reasons given were sufficient to lead Bryan Turner to say that "When classical social theory is redefined to include the twentieth century, Goffman will be one of the first nominees" (Turner, 2006: 249).

### 3. Erving Goffman and "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" in Contemporary Society

I consider that in the current social context, Goffman's writings in general and "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life" in particular are a good way to promote social sciences. Accessible language and the use of impactful linguistic metaphors "world as a theater", "stage", "behind the scenes", "face", "impression management", etc. can play the role of emotional triggers of "pro science" behaviors. It is a dissimulating way that, using the specific forms of intuitive knowledge, can direct the individual towards scientific knowledge.

The growing tolerance of contemporary society to various forms of knowledge makes old criticisms of Goffman's theory (minimizing the effects of a theory centered on face-to-face interindividual relations or considering the method of dramaturgical analysis unscientific) disappear and become anachronistic.

The emergence of new communication technologies has irreversibly changed the social relations between individuals. We are talking about a plurality of social relationships that generate multiple social identities. The names are very diverse. For example, exploring how new technologies affect identity, Gergen proposes the concept of "Saturated Self" (Gergen, 1991). The saturation he is talking about is due to overloaded mediated interactions. Through the amount of information issued, new technologies saturate and neutralize the traditional notion of the centralized self but open the possibility of the emergence of multiple identities. In this way, each individual contains a variety of others that cannot necessarily harmonize and become a populated multiple self. This multiplicity can be understood in terms of different personalities that we acquire from identifying with others. Gergen calls these egos social ghosts. People move in time and space, gaining fictional characters, imaginary friends, and other possible entities with whom they engage in imaginary private conversations. This internalized other can also be understood as a model, role or internal voice that contributes to the inner dialogue we have with ourselves. Throughout this process, although the "I" may be fragmented, the experience of identity is made as a coherent unit. Coherence results from the specific human condition of giving meaning to reality, ultimately allowing the construction of one's own story. Here, narration is not only a kind of communication but also a fundamental cognitive tool responsible for organizing possible egos in a coherent way.

Gergen's "postmodern" conception of identity seems to revive Erving Goffman's theory of the constitution and management of a plurality of faces and thus of social selves. The old Goffmanian representations whose "performances" took place in "face-to-face" meetings in order to favorably manage personal impressions have as their place of development in the contemporaneity, the virtual environment.

The consequences of the relocation of face-to-face meetings are also found in the way they are explored. New methods of investigating online reality seem to be built on "unscientific" landmarks set by Goffman. We are practically witnessing a decline in traditional research methods (Berkman, 2009). The information overload, people being too busy, or a lack of confidence in research results has led to an increase in the number of rejections of questions asked via email, telephone, or face-to-face situations. Moreover, given the pace at which changes are taking place in today's society, traditional research is likely to reflect typical thinking, attitudes, and behavior a few months late.

In traditional studies, researchers scientifically construct a sample so that the answers received are valid for the entire population. Although this is important in determining the needs of a population, the identified opinion does not provide data on the special typologies of individuals, the influential ones who have very strong opinion, those

who are leaders and are listened to and respected. These "new influencers", so ubiquitous in contemporary (online) societies, can be identified by a method that by the different mode of action seems to belong to the unorthodox family of research methods proposed by Goffman. Robert Berkman metaphorically calls it "strategic listening." (Berkman: 31)

The place where we can use the method proposed by Berkman is the Social Media space (blogs, forums, discussion groups, complaint sites, social networks). Here we can "listen" to key conversations about social trends. In this way, authentic data can be obtained about the preferences of individuals or important clues for identifying the currents of a community. Research in the Social Media space in the form of "strategic listening" thus receives new benchmarks. Objectivity is abandoned, and honesty becomes the ultimate value. This is possible in a community where you can easily find fake blogs (created by companies for your own interests), bloggers (to benefit from the ads you post), or bloggers who work for certain companies. The obvious axiological differences between objectivity and honesty are the reasons why, in discovering the preferences and opinions of typical individuals, Berkman recommends using focus groups or traditional research in general, and for new information (from the new virtual world) we can use (unscientific) art of strategic listening (Berkman, 2009: 29).

The presented elements show that for the contemporary society, the coexistence of the forms of intuitive knowledge with those of scientific knowledge are not only an existing reality but also a desirable one. Through this, Erving Goffman continually enhances the values of his theories and remains one of our outstanding "contemporaries" through spirit and message.

**Conclusion**

Goffman's genius lies in his ability to find order in a seemingly improvised and random world. The metaphors used make reading his works a real pleasure and raise the curtain of social interactions in a simple (not simplistic) and direct way.

Goffman's self-presentation theory is a metaphor for the individual who "performs" in society. Beyond labels, his perspective must be taken as a general theory of face-to-face interactions that can be used to interpret any social change. In the world of social sciences, the proposed method of investigation must be seen as one of the many possibilities for analysis.

The emergence of new communication technologies and the birth of virtual worlds have allowed the emergence of spaces of refuge for the contemporary individual. It is not clear whether these are stages or backstage for social actors, but it is certain that in the analysis of "everyday life" in virtual reality, the dramaturgical model is a necessary method. In fact, in this capacity, to be always current and universally valid for any of the human communities, lies the true value of Erving Goffman's sociological theory.

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