

## Department of Sociology, 2<sup>nd</sup> semester

### SOC 201

#### Contribution of Goffman

Erving Goffman is one of the most influential twentieth century American Sociologist. His best known statement of dramaturgical theory, “Presentation of self in Everyday life”, was published in 1959. Goffman saw much in common between theatrical performance and the kind of ‘acts’ we all put in our day to day actions and interactions. Interaction is seen as very fragile, maintained by social performance. Poor performance or disruptions are seen as great threat to social interaction just as they are the theatrical performances.

Goffman went quite far ub his analogy between the stage and social interaction. In all social interaction, there is a ‘front region’ which is the parallel of the stage front in a theatrical performance. Actors both on stage and in social life are seen as being interested in appearances, wearing costumes and using props. Furthermore, in both, there is a ‘back region’, a place to which the actors can retire to prepare themselves for their performances. Backstage or offstage, in theatre terms, the actors can shed their roles and be themselves.

Dramaturgical analysis is clearly consistent with its symbolic interactionist roots. It has a focus on actors, action and interaction. Working in the same arena as traditional symbolic interactionism, Goffman found a brilliant metaphor in the theater to shed new light on small scale social processes.

Interactionist perspective: Goffman refers organizations to as ‘total institutions’, which is defined as “a place of residence and work where large number of like situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time together lead an enforced formally administered round of life”. Examining the interaction which takes place from the viewpoint of inmates, Goffman claims that total institutions are ‘the forcing houses for the changing persons’.

Many of the admission procedures and future interactions within total institutions not only tend to change but also to mortify the self. In Goffman’s words, ‘the inmate begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self’. Such experiences tend to breakdown inmates former self concept. The self is then slowly rebuilt, partly by means of reward and punishments administered by those in authority. Goffman argues that many of the actions of inmates can only be understood with reference to strict supervision and mortification of self that occurs in many total institutions.

Not all inmates respond in the same way to the life in total institutions. Goffman defines five modes of adaptation, which an inmate may imply at different stages.

1. Situation withdrawal: The inmate withdraws attention from everything except events immediately surrounding his body and minimizes his interaction with others.

2. Intransigent line: The inmate flatly refuses to cooperate with the staff and exhibits sustained hostility towards the institutions.
3. Colonization: The inmate becomes institutionalized; he finds a home and defines life more desirable in the institution than life outside.
4. Conversion: Here the inmate (individual) adopts the staffs definition of the model inmate and acts out the part.
5. In most total insitutions, the majority of inmates adopt a strategy which some of them call 'playing it cool'. In this circumstance, the inmate will have a maximum chance of eventually getting out physically and psychologically undamaged.

However, interactionist perspective concentrates on small scale interaction and ignores the wider society. Goffman also gives little consideration to the inmate experiences in the outside world before they entered the total institutions.