

CHAPTER 10

Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology

Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World

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The original inspiration for dramaturgical sociology, the subject of this chapter, derives from the greatest playwright in the English language: William Shakespeare. It was Shakespeare who adorned London's famous Globe Theater with the Latin motto *Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* (All the World Is a Theater) and who wrote the following lines for Jacques in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

For Erving Goffman (1922–1982), arguably the most original American theorist of the second half of the 20th century, the metaphor of life as theater is rich in meaning. He sees all human interaction as, in some ways, very much like a grand play. He is not, however, as concerned with sweeping generalizations about the human condition as he is with the particulars of daily life—the micro-level interactions between individuals that, when taken together, constitute the human experience. At this micro level, he argues, the world is much more like a stage than we commonly realize.

For Goffman, the subject matter of dramaturgical sociology is the creation, maintenance, and destruction of common understandings of reality by people working individually and collectively to present a shared and unified image of that reality. The brilliant insight that makes Goffman's book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) so significant is that this process, which he believes lies concealed deep within every interaction, is familiar to all of us in the form of the theater. In a play, actors try to convey to an audience a particular impression of the world around them. Through the use of scripted dialogue, gestures, props, costumes, and so on, actors create a new reality for the audience to consider.

It is Goffman's claim that if we understand how a contemporary American actor can convey an impression of an angst-ridden Danish prince during a presentation of *Hamlet*, we can also understand how an insurance agent tries to act like a professional operating with a combination of expert knowledge and goodwill. If we can understand how a small stage can be used to represent all of Rome and Egypt in *Antony and Cleopatra*, we can also understand how the Disney Store creates a sense of adventure and wonder in any local mall. Also, if we can understand the process by which two paid actors convince us that they are madly in love in *Romeo and Juliet*, we can understand how flight attendants manage and use their emotions for commercial gain. In this chapter, we will attempt to explain aspects of Goffman's metaphor by taking insurance agents, employees of the Walt Disney corporation, flight attendants, and car salespeople as examples of how people create alternate realities. Beyond the metaphor of social life as dramatic ritual, Goffman sensed the potential for alienation brought about because of the problems of authentically embracing a role rather than feeling a certain ambivalence or distance from it. This alienation is also critical to Goffman's analysis.

Before directly reviewing Goffman's dramaturgical analysis of social interaction, we must briefly consider his rather unique conception of selfhood because it is crucial to his method of analysis. Goffman does not believe in a "self" in the traditional sense; he does not think that we can discuss people's selves abstracted from their social situations. He writes,

This self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action . . . this self is a product of a scene that comes off, and not a cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has specific location . . . [the individual and his body] merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside inside the peg. (Goffman, 1959, pp. 252–253)¹

Goffman is arguing here that the self is not an entity that is in some sense antecedent to its enactment, but rather that it arises in the very process of performance. What is crucial is a recognition that, for Goffman, talking about the individual as some sort of autonomous agent is incorrect; rather, the individual should be thought of always in relationship to a social whole. Thus, the fundamental unit of social analysis, for Goffman (1959), is not the individual but rather what he refers to as the "team." He writes, "a teammate is someone whose dramaturgical cooperation one is dependent upon in fostering a given definition of the situation" (p. 83). Teams, then, are responsible for the creation of perceptions of reality in social settings. The crux of his dramaturgical social theory is that the analysis of how teams cooperate to foster particular impressions of reality reveals a complex system of interactions that, in many ways, is like the presentation of a play.

Goffman assumes that his theory could be applied to all social activities, but it is especially visible in certain commercial settings. This will be illustrated in the four examples we have chosen to employ. The first is Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* (1983), in which she looks at the world of airline flight attendants. She describes the types of social interaction found among flight attendants, contending that the entire flight crew must form a coherent, unified team intent on conveying to passengers a sense of competence and friendliness. If any attendant started behaving rudely or, worse, incompetently, the entire project would fail. Similarly, employees in the Disney Store, the focus of Kelly Kraft's ethnographic study, must all foster a sense of adventure and wonder for customers; if one employee looks sullen and bored, the atmosphere will be lost, and the team's attempt to convey a particular understanding of reality will be deemed a failure. The final examples we use come from Guy Oakes's study of insurance salespeople and Stephen Miller's study of car salesmen, who, as we shall see, must expend considerable energy to establish a particular impression of who they are and what they can do for a customer if they are to be successful.

How do people convince other people—specifically consumers—to adopt a particular understanding of various social scenes? Goffman says that this is accomplished by using the tools of the theater. It takes collaborative effort to stage a convincing performance, complete with roles, scripts, costumes, and a stage. Only when all these are employed to create a coherent picture of reality can a team be successful.

Roles

A crucial part of Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor is the role. Generally, the role is the particular image that a single actor wants to convey. It is the essence, the contrived sense of self, that the individual wants to project to the world. Just as an actor may adopt the role of a troubled Danish prince or a blues-loving ex-con, individuals in social settings must adopt the traits necessary to the understanding of reality they want to project. For instance, Guy Oakes argues that to effectively sell insurance, one must adopt the role of the dedicated and knowledgeable professional.

Of course, most people in white-collar careers must put on a display of professionalism. However, Oakes suggests that, in many ways, the insurance agent has a more difficult task than other professionals. For various reasons, there is a widespread public perception that insurance agents are sleazy and underhanded. As one of the insurance agents Oakes (1990) interviewed stated, "You really get shit on in this business" (p. 102).

The more insurance agents in general are believed to be sleazy, the harder particular insurance agents must work to avoid demonstrating such qualities. Being perceived as a "professional" is an ideal way to provide agents with the credibility they so desperately need to close sales. The aspiring agent must figure out precisely what is required to successfully convey a professional role, which, Oakes (1990) states in the following passage, involves an emphasis on expertise and advice rather than a single-minded emphasis on selling a product:

Like . . . other professionals, the agent claims to be an expert in the solution of certain problems in which the public has a substantial interest. The agent places this expertise at the disposal of a client, who receives confidential advice. . . . This is why training manuals describe the agent as a "financial doctor." The buyer/seller conception of salesmanship is relegated to the pioneer days of personal selling. It is replaced by the professional/client relationship, in which the function of the agent is to assist clients in solving their problems by applying specialized skills and offering expert advice.

Insurance agents must understand not only that they are to present themselves as experts who want to help, but also that they must have enough knowledge of the life insurance industry to actually be of assistance. Most insurance agencies provide comprehensive training to prospective agents. This training process serves a dual purpose. First, of course, is to make sure that agents have all the information they will eventually need. It is difficult to look like a credible professional if one does not understand what one is selling. Second, although the training process itself has value to the industry, if there is a public perception that agents require specialized education, agents will instantly get a certain credibility—they will look like professionals—when they obtain some kind of educational credential. Goffman (1959) explains this as follows:

Labor unions, universities, trade associations, and other licensing bodies require practitioners to absorb a mystical range and period of training . . . in part to foster the impression that the licensed practitioner is someone who has been reconstituted by his learning experience and is now set apart from other men. (p. 46)

Airline flight attendants must adopt a role that imposes rather different demands and expectations from that of insurance agents. Flight attendants have more direct contact with the public than anyone else in an airline and therefore have many responsibilities associated with the comfort and safety of passengers. Ultimately, when customers remember a particular flight, they will almost certainly remember the flight attendants more than any other airline employee. Flight attendants represent the public face of the entire company. The most basic role of the flight attendant is to be pleasant and reassuring. This is emphasized in airline advertisements:

Through the 1950s and 1960s the flight attendant became a main subject of airline advertising, the spearhead of market expansion. The image they chose, among many possible ones, was that of a beautiful and smartly dressed Southern white woman, the supposed epitome of gracious manners and warm personal service. (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 92–93; reprinted with permission of The Regents of California and University of California Press)

The stewardess² is supposed to represent all the things passengers would like to see in servants—stewardesses are graceful, elegant, friendly, and, above all, constantly smiling. This is such a crucial component of the flight attendant's job that it is emphasized even before the interview. Hochschild (1983) notes,

Applicants are urged to read a preinterview pamphlet before coming in. In the 1979–1980 *Airline Guide to Stewardess and Steward Careers*, there is a section called "The Interview." Under the subheading "Appearance," the manual suggests that facial expressions should be "sincere" and "unaffected." One should have a "modest but friendly smile" and be "generally alert, attentive, not overly aggressive, but not reticent either." Under "Mannerisms," subheading "Friendliness," it is suggested that a successful candidate must be "outgoing but not effusive," "enthusiastic with calm and poise," and "vivacious but not effervescent." (pp. 95–96)

In addition to these components of the role, individual airlines add other requirements. There are relatively few qualitative differences between airlines, but to the extent that airlines want to individuate themselves, to stand out in a crowded market, their flight attendants must be in some way unique. Thus, during the time of her study, Hochschild (1983) found that "United Airlines, the consensus has it, is 'the girl-next-door,' the neighborhood babysitter grown up. Pan Am is upper class, sophisticated, and slightly reserved in its graciousness. PSA is brassy, fun-loving, and sexy" (p. 97).

Some companies have tried to further individuate themselves by making their flight attendants adopt semisexualized roles in an attempt to appeal to certain segments of the market. Hochschild (1983) notes the following:

The omnipresent smile [in airline advertisements] suggests, first of all, that the flight attendant is friendly, helpful, and open to requests. But when words are added, the smile can be sexualized, as in “We really move our tails for you to make your every wish come true” (Continental) or “Fly me, you’ll like it” (National). Such innuendoes lend strength to the conventional fantasy that in the air, anything can happen. . . . The sexualized ad burdens the flight attendant with another task, beyond being unfailingly helpful and open to requests: She must respond to the sexual fantasies of passengers. She must try to feel and act as if flirting and propositioning are “a sign of my attractiveness and your sexiness,” and she must work to suppress her feelings that such behavior is intrusive or demeaning. (pp. 93–94)

The role of the flight attendant is very tightly circumscribed. At a minimum, the flight attendant must project an impression of friendliness and pleasantness; usually more requirements are added to the role to fit the desires of the particular airline. Of course, flight attendants have other requirements as well. They must know where safety equipment is located, they must make sure that passengers are complying with safety regulations, and they must be able to efficiently and calmly instruct passengers about what to do in case of various types of emergencies. Airlines do not want to play up these features, however, because to mention them would be to raise questions about the airline’s safety.

No matter how well an actor understands his or her role, he or she must be capable of conveying it to an audience. In Goffman’s sociology, the common or shared understanding of reality *is* reality. A “friendly” flight attendant who seems surly will not please management; a wealthy insurance agent who dresses shabbily probably will not sell many policies. An actor who cannot manipulate the common understanding successfully will be a failure. Goffman’s sociology, then, is the study of how people get other people to see things in a certain way. They do this, he claims, by using a variety of theatrical tools.

Scripts

Perhaps the most important means of getting an audience to understand a role is a script; certainly theater as we know it relies on scripts. Goffman claims that scripts are vital to interpersonal interaction as well. Of course, most interpersonal communication is relatively improvisational—we make it up as we go along. In everyday life, however, some elements of conversation are pretty well scripted. If a person asks a casual acquaintance how he or she is doing, the acquaintance is likely to reply with a simple “Fine, yourself?” rather than a sincere, well-thought-out description of what he or she is really thinking or feeling at the moment. This is a fragment of conversation we are so used to employing that it feels automatic. Thus, scripts can allow us a

great deal of convenience; they constitute a taken-for-granted quality in which, rather than creating our lines out of whole cloth, we borrow from a stock of well-worn scripts.

Commercial settings often make use of increasingly formalized scripts, which can provide distinct advantages to all parties. Often, retail store managers write scripts that are passed down to the people who must actually go about making sales. One extreme example of this is provided by the Disney company, which, as Kraft (1994) discovered in her research, gives staffers (or "Cast Members," in their words) a set of rigidly prescribed scripts:

These scripts offer verbatim responses Disney Store executives would like to hear used by Cast Members. . . . Frequently, a Cast Member becomes dependent on the scripts and mindlessly repeats the same message to every guest he or she encounters. The greeting traditionally offered at the front of the store is an example of how closely the scripts are followed. When a Cast Member was trained in 1991, he or she received a handout [which included the statement] "When you are greeting, the exact script is 'Hi! Welcome to the Disney Store!' There are to be no variations of this script used . . . ever." (p. 8)

In this case, a script is used to control and limit employee autonomy. The management has a particular role that it wants employees to adopt: friendly, cheerful, and helpful, but somewhat aloof, like a cartoon character. Disney corporate officials have concluded that the best way to ensure that employees actually adopt this role is to force it on them. It should also be noted that the scripts sometimes have advantages for the clerks. Kraft noted that Cast Members frequently become reliant on the scripts, using them as convenient crutches. Similarly, many telephone solicitors use obviously scripted messages when they call people; reading scripts is a simple process that requires little training or thought and thus makes the solicitor's job much easier.

Script use in direct sales is in no way limited to controlling employees or providing a convenience in place of more sophisticated kinds of training. Frequently, scripts are used to control customers, to compel them to buy a given product. Car sellers need to have a very comprehensive understanding of their customers, and to gain it they often employ an almost ritualized conversation. For instance, Stephen Miller learned the following in his study of this much-maligned occupation:

The salesperson employs the demonstration ride to establish a situation in which the customer will communicate to the salesperson what he values in an automobile and why, information which can be used to stress the merits of the automobile being considered and influence a decision (Miller, 1964, p. 19).

One salesperson explained this technique, claiming, "I ask him how he likes the way it handles, how about the power and a lot of other things. . . . By the time we finish the ride, I have a good idea of what he wants in a car" (Miller, 1964, p. 19; reprinted with permission).

By using a strictly patterned conversational format, the agent can gain insights into what will make the customer buy a car. To the extent that these conversations follow a predictable form, they are scripted, even though the particulars of the discussion will change from one customer to the next.

Furthermore, there is a sense in which the entire sales transaction follows a loose script. Miller divides the process of selling a car into three stages, the second and third arising as a logical result of the previous stage. First comes the “contact,” when a salesperson first interacts with someone who may or may not be interested in buying a car. If the potential customer shows any interest, the transaction moves into the second stage, the “pitch,” in which the agent attempts to size up precisely what the customer wants and how much he or she will pay for it. Finally, if the customer does not walk out during the pitch, the transaction proceeds to the final stage, the “close,” in which the agent tries to get the customer to agree with the agent’s understanding of this particular social reality—that is, tries to convince the customer to pay a certain amount for a particular car.

In a sense, these distinct stages of the transaction look like different scenes in a play; each has its own rules, each follows from the developments of the preceding scenes, and the action (if the agent is successful) rises to a cathartic agreement and ultimate resolution in the final act. Thus, sales transactions seem scripted at the level of both individual lines and the broad outlines of the play. In both cases, the script is used to control the customer, to get him or her to see reality the same way the car seller sees it.

In a play, the script is often the most important aspect of an actor’s role—ultimately, we are more likely to remember Hamlet’s soliloquies than the stage directions or what kind of jewelry he wore. In social interaction, this is not always the case. First, scripted interaction in real life is rarely mutual; the seller is following a script that the buyer is generally unaware of and therefore may not follow. Also, as noted previously, scripted interaction is rarely formal; although the car seller has a general notion of what kinds of things need to be said and when, the phrasing of individual lines is usually improvisational so that the script is more of a general outline than a specific blueprint. Because the script is not quite as important in social interaction as it is in theater, we can expect other tools of the actor to play a slightly larger part in conveying a person’s role in a social interaction than those same tools do in a play. An individual selling a car cannot control with precision what the customer will say, so he or she must focus attention more on those things that *can* be controlled.

Costumes

One element that is crucial to actors is the potential impact of their costumes. This is because what people are wearing is probably the quickest way to form an impression of them and their social status. Before a word is uttered in a play, we can size up characters on stage: the one wearing tattered rags is probably much poorer than the one wearing a fine suit, and so on. In precisely the same way, an individual’s wardrobe is vital to presenting to the audience his or her particular role in the drama being played out at the moment.

For instance, as noted previously, insurance sellers have a tremendous incentive to look like professionals. This suggests several aspects about their wardrobe. First, of course, because professionals are supposed to be relatively well-off financially (especially, one would hope, professionals in financial services), agents would be

wise to adopt the dress and habits of the financially secure. This might partially explain why companies frequently give prizes such as gold watches and vacations to exotic locales to agents who are especially productive (Oakes, 1990)—flashy watches and nice tans are luxuries that come with relative wealth. Although insurance agents generally do not make enough money to qualify as rich, it is helpful if their costumes suggest that they do qualify.

Second, there is more to the costume of the agent than just a suggestion of wealth. One of the selling points of most insurance policies is that they are relatively secure investments; agents urge potential customers to take a fiscally conservative approach to investing. Obviously, it is easier to take someone dressed in a sober business suit seriously on this point than, for example, someone wearing leather pants and an outrageous jacket.

Not all costumes are intended to say the same things, however. Roles that do not involve notions of professionalism may require different types of clothing. At the Disney Store, for example, employees must conform to a very strict dress code, which includes white shoes, pink shirts, and blue cardigans with an “M” on the lower left-hand side. Men must wear gray polyester pants; women must wear gray polyester skirts (Kraft, 1994). Obviously, these costumes are not designed to suggest that the Cast Members are part of the educated professional class; rather, they tie into a notion of nostalgia that Disney is trying to establish and exploit.

Stages and Sets

The other major tool the actor can employ to control audience reaction is the stage and its setting. If, as the curtain rises, the audience members see what looks like the inside of a mansion, they will assume certain things about what the play will be about—things they would not assume if the curtain rose on a jungle scene. The physical environment of a play, then, can provide a context for the action that is to follow, locating it at a particular point in space and time in the audience's mind. Similarly, the use of the physical environment can establish a context for social interaction; if used skillfully, it can help one team convince the other to adopt the preferred understanding of reality.

Perhaps the most obvious aspect of using stages is the introduction of scenery. Of course, some sellers have very little control over the scenery at their place of work; the door-to-door salesperson, for instance, must work with whatever scenery he or she finds in a particular home. Sometimes, however, sellers have a great deal of control over their environments and use it effectively. The Disney Corporation has spent tremendous amounts of time and money designing the scenery in its retail stores to foster an impression of a fantasy world of some sort, right down to selecting the soundtracks that best evoke this conjured reality. Kraft (1994) notes that

The music playing in the background is a mixture of classic and new Disney tunes. The songs are designed to remind one of a special childhood memory or a much loved movie. . . . The music is intended to capture the imagination and transport the shopper further into the depths of the Magic Kingdom. It is easy

to become captivated by the shelves stuffed with familiar characters. Before too long, the shopper has become completely enveloped by the package. The Disney Store is intended to offer more than the average retail shopping experience. It attempts to bring a piece of the Magic Kingdom to all who “visit.” (pp. 1–2)

With this manipulation of the physical surroundings, Disney tries to make the process of shopping less like a banal consumer experience and more like some kind of mild adventure, or at least a nostalgia trip. Manipulation of scenery is part of a conscious effort to replace the mundane with the fantastic—that is, to change people’s perceptions of reality.

Another use of stages that is common in many social interactions is the division between front and back stages. The front stage is what confronts the audience—what they see. The back stage, by contrast, is a place where all the support activities necessary for maintaining the performance on the main stage will go on. In theater, the back stage is where actors who are not involved in the scene going on at the moment mill about; where props that will be used at other times are stored; and where the counterbalances, lights, and so on that make the scenery convincing to the audience are hidden. Goffman (1959) points out that the crucial element that allows the back stage to be useful for these purposes is that “the back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude” (p. 113). Thus, most back regions are clearly divided from the public fronts so that only team members have access. Manifestations of region-specific behavior abound in everyday life. Goffman claims that putting locks on bathroom stall doors exhibits a certain region behavior because presumably while one is in the stall, the public front cannot be maintained (p. 121). Houses are divided along these front stage/backstage lines as well: guests are frequently confined to living and dining rooms and rarely invited to see bedrooms or bathrooms. Similarly, many houses have front doors that are used primarily for more formal situations; family members often use back or side doors for day-to-day admission.

Backstage regions have two major purposes, both related to the maintenance of the proper persona or atmosphere on the front stage. They must serve as a storing ground for physical items that cannot be on the front stage, and they must also provide employees a place to regroup, a place where they take care of their emotional needs. The physical requirements of backstage may not be particularly surprising. Most retail shops, for instance, try not to clutter the stage with too much stuff but want to have enough of certain popular items to ensure that they will not run out. A storeroom, then, is crucial. Shoe stores offer perhaps the best example of this; most of them leave one pair of each style of shoe on display, but because they need several pairs of each size of shoe in each style to satisfy customers, they have a need for a well-organized back stage, where piles of shoe boxes can sit without being observed. Back regions are also helpful for storing things not sold by the business but that are vital to the maintenance of the proper atmosphere on stage. Retail stores are almost uniformly clean; this means that vacuum cleaners, mops, glass cleaners, and so on must be kept where they can be accessed regularly, but because cleanliness usually mandates a lack of visible cleaning supplies, the equipment must be hidden from public scrutiny.

The physical requirements of back regions in commerce are frequently rather mundane, as these examples show. Back stages often have a more interesting purpose as well: they often provide for the emotional needs of employees so that they can continue to give the proper performance on stage. One crucial element is the informality afforded by the back stage. During a performance, people have to be constantly vigilant to ensure that they do not betray their roles; they must stay in character, follow whatever script they are using, and so on. Such rigidity can be exhausting, and the ability to go to a place where the audience will not see or hear anything provides a safety valve for employees. Thus, backstage areas provide employees with an opportunity to take a break. Indeed, this is frequently the chief function of one backstage region, the break room, where employees can sit down, have some coffee, and relax for a few minutes before continuing the show at hand.

Backstage areas are also useful in that they allow team members to discuss with each other what could be changed about the performance if, for example, one member of the team is failing or if the customer is behaving oddly. In retail stores, then, one would expect most discussions that are not directly part of the performance to only occur backstage, and almost all parts of the early training process in almost all vocations occur away from the public arena.

The degree to which region behavior is engraved in the consumer's consciousness can be highlighted by an example that shows how this very awareness of the difference between front and back stages is exploited by some businesses to further the impression they want to foster. Car buyers, according to Miller, are not often given access to information such as the actual cost to a dealership of a car or the average selling price of the car, so they have to negotiate, to a certain extent, blindly. This allows the dealerships to get the best possible deal for themselves while leaving the customer, who presumably has haggled a few thousand dollars off the sticker price by the end of the negotiation, feeling satisfied. One technique many dealers employ to guarantee this satisfaction is "changing sides," in which salespeople seem to come to the conclusion that the customer is getting the better end of the deal but, because they like the customer, they will act as advocates for the customer and get the deal approved by the hostile sales manager. This is where the use of space comes into the picture. At this point in the negotiations, the seller will go into the sales office. This is an office inside the dealership where the sales manager approves contracts. The customers see the seller walk into the office but cannot hear what goes on inside it. Presumably, then, the office is a backstage area. The seller and the sales manager, however, are fully aware that the customer is waiting, outside, paying close attention to the office. They frequently use this knowledge to dupe the customer. Miller (1964) quotes one sales manager, describing what goes on in the office as follows: "He [the salesman] comes to me and says, 'Here you are' . . . I OK the deal . . . he ain't going to come to me with a bad one . . . he waits, sits down, smokes a cigarette, then goes back to the customer" (p. 20).

Although the process need only take a few moments, it is prolonged so that the customer will get nervous. Presumably, the customer will think the only reason this could take so long is that the deal is being debated hotly. As time passes, the customer will get increasingly nervous and increasingly confident that he or she has indeed driven a hard bargain—perhaps too hard. This is confirmed when the salesperson,

on his return to the customer, says he encountered difficulty in having the deal accepted (“you sure got me in a lot of trouble”) but that he managed to convince the sales manager (“I got him to accept your deal”). By further implication, the salesperson manages to communicate to the buyer that he is a unique and shrewd negotiator (“I’m glad I don’t get many like you”) (Miller, 1964, p. 20).

The office, in this case, serves as a tool for fostering the impression of reality that the dealership hopes to convey to the customer, although only because it is thought of as a backstage region even by the customer. This is especially the case in dealerships in which the sales office has windows through which the customer can peek; one would expect to see wild gesticulations and some red faces, although in all probability the manager and seller would be discussing where to go to lunch because the performers know that aurally they are backstage while visually they are on the front stage.

In this case, the car dealership is participating in a complex interaction; it is a version of what Goffman (1974) called a play within a play, used to make audience members think they are seeing a behind-the-scenes interaction that is, of course, happening on stage:

In brief, a glimpse behind the scenes can be a device for inducing the belief that you are seeing the backstage of something. Obviously, once you’ve got the staging area and the backstage you’ve got the whole thing and can feel secure in your frame anchorage. And the moment you feel secure, of course, is the moment you can be diddled. (p. 475)

The sense of security the customer gets in seeing the supposedly backstage rituals of the salesperson and sales manager allows the final phase of the sales process to be completed successfully and amicably, although a good deal of manipulation and misinformation is engaged in before this conclusion can be reached.

Impression Management and Sincerity

Stages and region behavior provide important tools for the manipulation of public perceptions of reality. Combined with scripts, props, and costumes, they allow teams a great deal of control over the impression of reality they convey to audiences. Goffman’s analysis is concerned with more than the process of manipulation, however; he is also concerned with the effects of manipulation on the actor. At the most basic level, all the methods described previously, and indeed the very idea of projecting a particular impression of reality, can lead to a certain insincerity. Goffman is very interested in how this insincerity comes about, what actors do to counteract it, and what happens if they are unsuccessful in the attempt to deal with insincerity. The theater example we have been following becomes less relevant at this point; obviously, actors in a play know that the impression of reality they want to project is not “real”; they know they are not Danish princes or poor Londoners. Rather, Goffman is interested in the problems caused by living life *like* a play—on how that affects a person’s psychological state and behavior.

As Goffman (1959) claims in the following, whenever actors adopt a role, they must take a position on their belief in the role—they must decide whether they feel that the impression of reality they will project is “true”:

At one extreme, one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act; he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality. . . . At the other extreme, we find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine. This possibility is understandable, since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on. . . . When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term “sincere” for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performances. (pp. 17–18)

It is important to note that although individuals can be anywhere in between these two extremes of belief in their own performance, they must be somewhere—that is, every performer must, consciously or not, have some level of acceptance of the part he or she is playing.

Obviously, in most cases, it will be much easier to present a convincing performance if one is relatively sincere about one's performance, and consequently, many teams will go to great lengths to convince individual performers of the reality of their presentation. The insurance industry works hard to prevent agents from becoming cynical because buyers find it difficult to trust agents who are not committed to their product and because agents are very likely to “burn out” quickly if they do not believe in what they are doing.³ Agencies are well aware of this and make great efforts to convince their vendors to believe in the product they are selling. To foster genuine belief in the value of life insurance, they promote what Oakes (1990) calls “the philosophy of financial security” (p. 104). This philosophy claims that, macroeconomic trends and luck notwithstanding, each individual is directly responsible for his or her economic lot in life. Furthermore, the purpose of life is, according to this philosophy, to provide financial security for one's self and loved ones. Because each individual is capable of attaining this goal, it is simple to measure people's goodness by their net worth and, more generally, their ability to provide for their family.

Once the insurance agent begins to believe this simple but compelling picture of his or her role, the agent can often be convinced that the role he or she is about to assume is not one of huckster trying to profit off other people's misfortunes but instead approaches that of hero because, as Oakes (1990) explains,

Life insurance agents constitute the priesthood of the religion of life insurance, the ministers and guardians of financial security planning. Because life insurance sales is legitimated as a high calling based on ethical imperatives, conscientious agents do not wait for financial exigencies in the lives of prospects to bring in business. For the prospect whose health and security are at stake, tomorrow may be too late. Because of their obligation to safeguard the financial future of prospects, agents are able to take pride in the fact that

they are sales personnel. Agents justify their work by conceiving it not as a commercial transaction, but as an exercise of moral responsibility. (p. 106)

In Goffman's language, the industry has an interest in fostering sincerity on the part of their agents. Insurance, for them, must not be merely another commodity but must be something whose value they deeply believe in. Otherwise, the industry suggests, agents will find it impossible to succeed at selling policies because, as the Prudential company's training manual claims, "if you are insincere, your prospect will sense it" (W. Walsh as cited in Oakes, 1989, p. 247).

At the other end of the spectrum of belief, according to Miller, are some car salespeople. Rather than trying to convince themselves that they are doing unappreciative customers a tremendous favor, they tend to realize that they are exploiting buyers but construct a worldview that uses skill in haggling as the basis for determining worth. As Miller (1964) explains,

A majority of automobile salesmen admit that their customers regard them as "con men," who attempt to "put one over" on the buyer. In informal conversations regarding what makes a "good salesman," salesmen describe their role in much the same way: for example, "Anybody can sell something they [the customers] want but the real bit is to make them think they need exactly what you got to sell, only more of it." The consensus appears to be that the "good" salesman is highly proficient at manipulating the situation and customer in such fashion as to produce a favorable deal for the salesman. The object of the sales transaction, as an experienced older salesman expressed it, is to "make them think they are getting something instead of losing anything." . . . Their behavior appears organized around the premise that monetary and social success are the results of opportunistic dealing. (p. 22)

This highly cynical view treats the impression of reality the salesperson wants to project as a sham; furthermore, everyone but the customer knows that it is a sham.

Depending on how cynical people are, it may be possible for them to operate on a day-to-day basis with this assessment of their role. Most people, however, are uncomfortable with the view that they are actively exploiting suckers; they want to think of themselves as decent people. Car salespeople frequently justify their cynicism by claiming that the customers are just as bad or worse; they project the negative aspects of their own roles onto customers. Thus, as Miller (1964) writes, the salesperson sees customers as

opportunistic, "out to make or save a buck any way they can." By selectively perceiving and, if necessary, by misinterpreting the behavior of the customer to fit his own pattern of expectations, the salesman is able to rationalize the exploitative and manipulative aspects of his role, making his work acceptable to himself and tolerable to others. (p. 20)

Why is it necessary for the salesperson to go to such lengths to justify his or her behavior? The profit motive in deceiving and manipulating customers is quite clear,

so it might seem obvious that sellers should do anything possible within the law to rip customers off and not worry about it. The near-universal desire not to do so suggests that people are not comfortable with a tremendous amount of cynicism about their roles. They would prefer not to have to establish and maintain what Goffman calls "role distance,"⁴ which means that they dissociate themselves from, rather than wholeheartedly embrace, the role.

The role of salesperson is critical to the sales process. The individual selling the car, however, has more roles than just salesperson to maintain at any given time.

A particular performer, for instance, may want to project the images of "parent," "nice guy or nice person," "music lover," and "good friend" all at once. All these roles, however, are at least to a certain extent counteracted by a willingness to gleefully exploit uninformed customers; the individual probably does not want to think of himself or herself, and certainly does not want to be thought of by others, as a greedy, underhanded jerk. Thus, conflicting roles in an individual's life may cause distinct problems because the demands of one role may be incompatible with the demands of other roles.

There are various ways to attempt to reconcile these roles. The salespeople described previously did it by claiming that they were simply protecting themselves from greedy, exploitative customers; the customers are the bad guys, and the seller unfortunately has to respond in kind to survive. This does not make the seller a "bad guy" or "bad person" because, in normal circumstances, the seller would never resort to manipulating people the way he or she does to sell cars. Other methods of coping that Goffman suggests include joking or including other parts of contradictory roles in the situation at hand; the seller may try to prove that he or she is a good friend by acting unnecessarily friendly toward the client, or the seller may take an ironic stance toward one of his or her roles. This is not easy to pull off in car sales, but it could occur if, for instance, a salesperson made subtle jokes about the company's promotional literature, fellow employees, or even the act of selling.

These attempts to reconcile roles all involve, to a certain extent, emotion management. As noted previously, flight attendants have a somewhat unique job—one that focuses considerable attention on managing their emotions. The most important tool of the flight attendants, they are frequently told in training, is a ready smile (Hochschild, 1983, p. 105). Particular airlines emphasize that flight attendants should enjoy being flirted with or should go out of their way to be friendly to rude, drunk, or unreasonable passengers. In cases of role conflict, however, flight attendants cannot, like many workers, resort to the expression of emotions common to other roles to resolve the tension because their employers specifically stake out the emotional space of the attendant as a vital part of the attendant's role. As Hochschild observes,

Some workers conclude that only one self (usually the nonwork self) is the "real" self. Others, and they are in the majority, will decide that each self is meaningful and real in its own different way and time. . . . Such workers are generally more adept at acting, and the idea of a separation between the two selves is not only acceptable but welcome to them. They speak more matter-of-factly about their emotional labor in clearly defined and sometimes mechanistic ways: "I get in

gear, I get revved up, I get plugged in.” They talk of their feelings not as spontaneous, natural occurrences but as objects they have learned to govern and control. (p. 133)

In either case, flight attendants must recognize that their roles are fundamentally incompatible and must draw a clear division between them.

As soon as attendants realize that they are operating with contradictory goals, they will be in trouble; they will have increasing difficulty in appreciating their jobs and their passengers. Airlines, not surprisingly, do everything possible to put off this realization because the simplest way to convince passengers that the emotions of their attendants are sincere is for the emotions to actually be sincere. Thus, airlines spend a great deal of time in training suggesting ways that flight attendants may merge the seemingly contradictory emotional roles they are forced to deal with. Early in the education process, and frequently thereafter, flight attendants are trained in methods designed to actively manipulate their emotional states to avoid conflict. Delta hopes that, if flight attendants can connect with passengers on some level, they will be able to put forth a show of genuine emotion. For this reason, Hochschild (1983) notes,

The deepest appeal in the Delta training program was to the trainee’s capacity to act as if the airplane cabin (where she works) were her home (where she doesn’t work). Trainees were asked to think of a passenger as if he were a “personal guest in your living room.” (p. 105)

One graduate elaborated,

You think how the new person resembles someone you know. *You see your sister’s eyes in someone sitting at that seat.* That makes you want to put out for them. I like to think of the cabin as the living room of my own home. When someone drops in [at home], you may not know them, but you get something for them. You put that on a grand scale—thirty-six passengers per flight attendant—but *it’s the same feeling.* (p. 105)

This approach, if successful, could merge many of the roles that are likely to come into conflict for the flight attendant. The attendant’s role demands a display of genuine affection, but for most people, genuine affection is reserved for friends and relatives. By inviting flight attendants to think of passengers as friends or relatives, it may be easier for them to reconcile their emotional needs with their employer’s emotional demands.

Of course, most passengers are not relatives, friends, or even acquaintances; therefore, the attempt to see them as such is likely to break down fairly quickly, especially in the case of the troublesome passengers whom flight attendants are likely to be forced to deal with more often than they would like. Training programs anticipate this and attempt to build in safeguards to delay the moment when a flight attendant simply can no longer deal with the stresses of the job. One way is to think of irate, unruly, or otherwise troublesome fliers as children attempting to get attention; this not only helps the attendant connect with the customer, in an emotional way, but

also allows flight attendants to rationalize their role distancing by claiming that it is caused only by particularly immature customers and not by a fundamental problem in the constitution of the role.

There is only so much value to this coping strategy, however; at some point, flight attendants will not be able to think of drunken businessmen as children. Training programs tend to stress one last check on role-distancing behavior, this one more social than those mentioned previously. Flight attendants tend to work in teams and generally form a strong sense of group unity while flying particular routes. Companies exploit this by training attendants to recognize morale problems among coworkers and to try to counteract them (Hochschild, 1983, p. 115). This does not really do much to address the problem at hand, however; although friends may be able to cheer each other up, they will not be able to reconcile the conflicting roles that got the flight attendant into trouble in the first place. At the end of the day, the cynical flight attendant still must wrestle with the options of seeing his or her role as "fake" or "real."

Whatever option employees adopt, they must, to a certain extent, be insincere. If employees decide that only their "natural" (i.e., off-job) role is real, each action mandated by their role as flight attendants will come off as "phony" because it does not reflect their nonwork, real self. If employees decide that it is impossible to adopt both roles at once, they will constantly be aware, as flight attendants, that they are in some significant sense not being "true to themselves." Insincerity thus becomes a fundamental component of their daily life. Because of the special emotional demands placed on flight attendants, the ways in which their role by definition forces them to feel some insincerity are quite apparent.

According to Stanford Lyman and Marvin Scott (1974), "Goffman seems to see that a brooding and suspicious sense of inauthenticity is the basic condition of performative human existence" (p. 107). Roles always have a great potential to come into conflict, in countless ways. A working mother, for instance, may feel that, by working long hours, she is not dedicating enough time to her children and simultaneously feel, while spending time with her children, that she is neglecting her work.

Conflicting Role Expectations

Minor conflicts arise in all kinds of work situations. One very common source of trouble is an inability to reconcile the demands of a sales job with perceived ideals of service. Kraft (1994) reports a discrepancy between messages handed down by management as follows:

[Sales contests] imply that it is the quantity of the product that one sells that determines the quality of the clerk's work performance. The obvious message [is that] what is important becomes how much of any one thing is sold. . . . However, the company would, at other times, lead staff to believe that it is more concerned with the overall quality of service delivered. . . . They appear to contradict the sales contest message by claiming [Disney] is not exclusively "hard sell." In short, they expect and explicitly train the Cast Member to practice two contradictory styles. (pp. 10–11)

For clerks, if this problem exists, it arises only because management forces it. Insurance agents also find this problem inherent in the sales process. Insurance agents must convince others and must themselves believe that they are professionals dedicated to the financial well-being of their customers. What counts most to them and their employment future, however, is the ability to generate sales. Generally, professionals do not have to convince people that their services are valuable; doctors do not call people during dinner, convince them that they are ill, and try to schedule an appointment for surgery as soon as possible. Insurance agents, however, are forced to convince people of the need for coverage and then offer a range of alternatives to fulfill this newfound need. There is, therefore, an obvious and necessary friction for any insurance agent between two conflicting role expectations. To be professionals, they must worry about what their client needs and wants. To be salespeople, however, they must be most concerned with the bottom line.

Another type of conflict arises when it becomes impossible to reconcile demands for service and speed. Retailers, for instance, might be told to be personable to customers, to converse with them, and so on. They might be called to task if the actual application of these instructions leads to delay, however—that is, if in talking to a customer they seem to be neglecting other aspects of their job. A revealing example is again provided by flight attendants, who found in the 1970s that, due to an industrywide speed-up, they were forced to give the same amount of emotional labor in significantly less time (Hochschild, 1983, p. 122). In the 1980s, this got even worse because airlines found that, to stay in business, they had to make fewer flight attendants attend to more customers in less time. Something had to give, as stated in the following:

Before the speed-up, most workers sustained the cheerful good will that good service requires. They did so for the most part proudly. . . . After the speed-up, when asked to make personal human contact at an inhuman speed, they cut back on their emotion work and grew detached. (Hochschild, 1983, p. 126)

Of course, the ideal of service is not abandoned by either management or the flight attendant. The role demands placed on the employee do not change but must for better or worse be negotiated by each individual flight attendant.

The demands of the market, whether for speed or raw sales, sometimes are simply incompatible with the roles it compels individuals to adopt. When role distancing occurs, it might seem logical for people to recognize the conflicting nature of their situation and attempt to reconcile their discrepant roles. It is often very difficult, however, for agents caught up in the action to understand that their problems are caused by fundamental inconsistencies in the roles they are expected to adopt; rather, they tend to blame themselves, assuming that the problem is not that roles or role expectations are incompatible but that they are somehow “not good enough” to live up to their assigned roles, because, as Lyman and Scott (1974) note,

When people experience a suspension in their own belief in the naturalism or “authenticity” of the performance put on by themselves or others they approach a phenomenological understanding of the dramatic fundament of

human existence. These suspensions, however . . . are not usually taken to be a clue to the phenomenology of human existence itself, but rather to be an exposure of the "fraudulence" and "bad faith" of certain [performers]. (pp. 110–111)

"Real" Selves in a Commodified World

For insurance agents who cannot convince themselves of the authenticity of their own performances, instead of blaming the fundamental contradiction implicit in the roles they are asked to adopt, there is a tendency to blame themselves. Thus, they will think something similar to the following: "A *real* professional could manage to reconcile the demand to sell at all costs with the need to make service the utmost priority. I cannot. Therefore, I am flawed." Of course, if the agent wants to keep eating, he or she must continue to pretend to be a professional, and every performance will highlight some way in which professionalism is antithetical to the person's identity.

Similarly, flight attendants caught up in the inauthenticity of their emotional displays will find themselves torn between a desire to continue the job and find some way to fake the emotions they "should" authentically experience, on the one hand, and a growing recognition that each painted-on smile is more strained and further suggests that they are not cut out for this job, on the other. Role distancing thus tends to get increasingly worse as time goes on and more and more inauthentic productions are delivered. Due to the very nature of role conflict, it is difficult to resolve distancing without fundamentally changing the definition of either the self or the situation that one wants to project. The alienated actor must either quit the job that is causing the role problems or somehow learn to deal with the conflict, either by becoming highly cynical or somehow changing the personal roles that are thought of as constituting the "real" self.

Of course, it is always much more pleasant to give up a work self than a real self; we should not expect people to abandon their perceptions of themselves. In a tight labor market, however, we also should not expect people to give up their jobs, especially because they have likely received years of training and to switch careers would make them start at the bottom of the employment ladder again, which for someone approaching midlife can be financially disastrous. Cynicism, it seems, becomes a pretty reasonable option by default. Insurance agents might give up their ideals of service and professionalism and only pretend to offer these to the extent that they help the bottom line. Flight attendants might learn to effectively display friendliness, good cheer, and so on when feeling the absolute opposite. In both cases, the alienated professional will turn to a reliance on acting to reconcile his or her unpleasant circumstances.

Thus, Goffman's dramaturgy comes full circle. Social reality is a performed event, highly dependent on the various components of theater. For particular individuals to effectively communicate the social reality most advantageous to them, they must adopt roles regarding their vocations. At a certain point, however, these work roles will almost inevitably collide with the nonwork roles individuals hold dear, their supposed real selves. When this happens, individuals have a wide variety of options, but ultimately none of them is likely to fully resolve the conflict; the best solution, in

many cases, is to gloss over the conflict by acting—by using the tools of the stage. Goffman (1959) emphasizes that he is using theater as a metaphor and claims that ultimately, the world is not a stage, and it should not be difficult for readers to find major differences between the two. Given the complexity and compelling character of his dramaturgical sociology, however, it can be hard for readers to share Goffman's asserted willingness to abandon the metaphor of the theater.

Notes

1. Although this book was central to our analysis, we also relied on the following works by Goffman: *Encounters*. (1961). Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill; *Interaction ritual*. (1967). Garden City, NY: Doubleday; *Relations in public*. (1971). New York: Harper & Row. For thoughtful commentaries on Goffman's contribution to sociology, see the following: Burns, T. (1992). *Erving Goffman*. London: Routledge; Denzin, N. (2003). Much ado about Goffman. In A. J. Trevino (Ed.), *Goffman's Legacy* (pp. 127–142). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; Drew, P., & Wotton, A. (Eds.). (1988). *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order*. Boston: Northeastern University Press; Fine, G. A., & Manning, P. (2000). Erving Goffman. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The Blackwell companion to contemporary social theorists* (pp. 456–485). Oxford, UK: Blackwell; Lemert, C. (1997). Goffman. In *The Goffman reader* (pp. ix–xiii). Oxford, UK: Blackwell; Lyman, S. M. (1973). Civilization: Contents, discontents, and malcontents. *Contemporary Sociology*, 2, 360–366; Manning, P. (2005). Erving Goffman. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of social theory* (pp. 333–339). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Schell, T. J. (2005). Looking-glass self: Goffman as a symbolic interactionist. *Symbolic Interaction*, 28, 147–166.

2. Hochschild tended to use “stewardess” and “flight attendant” interchangeably because, during the time of her study, most were women, and even today the vast majority of flight attendants are women. In airline advertisements, most images of flight attendants depict females. We generally prefer the more gender-neutral “flight attendant,” although the subjects of Hochschild's study were overwhelmingly women.

3. At this point, Kraft's analysis of Disney stores becomes less relevant because sales jobs with Disney are conceived of not as careers but, for the most part, as short-term work. Certainly, all the features of alienation and role distancing discussed here would apply to someone who tried to model his or her professional role around that advocated by the Disney corporation.

4. Although Goffman hints at role distance briefly in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), he offers a much more thorough exposition of the phenomenon in a later essay titled simply “Role Distance.” For an analysis of this essay, see Burns (1992), *Erving Goffman*. As an antidote to role distance, see Schweingruber, D. (2006). Success through a positive mental attitude? The role of positive thinking in door-to-door sales. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 47, 41–68.

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