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Assignment Summary: This assignment is the final course paper for SOCY 152. The goal of the assignment was to evaluate one or more of the sociological constructs learned in class in light of an issue of our choice. This paper fulfills this requirement by analyzing Goffman's notions of performativity in light of the lived experiences of individuals with disabilities.

Paper Title: The Presentation of Disability in Everyday Life

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The Presentation of Disability in Everyday Life

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Abstract

In 1959, Erving Goffman published his influential book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. This significant study departed from traditional sociological examinations of institutions and societies to carefully examine the micro-scale of the self— one of the core constructs of modernity. While Goffman's theories have undoubtedly had a momentous impact on contemporary sociology, his analysis fails to fully encapsulate the lived experiences of all demographics. Of all potential subgroups, individuals with disabilities present an especially challenging case study for Goffman's perspective as disabled individuals grapple with a plethora of competing dynamics in performing their everyday lives. As one example, while having a disability often prevents the individual from performing in a way that enables advancement in society, this perceived deficiency may also propel that person into a performative role as they attempt to conceal their disabled identity. This paper begins by examining the tension between these and other behaviors, evaluating Goffman's *Presentation of Self* in light of the disabled experience. It then turns to Goffman's subsequent 1963 book *Stigma: Notes on The Management of Spoiled Identity* in which Goffman examines stigmatized individuals, including those with disabilities, and how they navigate their lives. By juxtaposing these works, a more nuanced perspective on the role of stigmatization as a constraining factor in disabled performance can be obtained. This paper then concludes by examining some of the contemporary literature arising out of Disability Studies in order to assess recent discussions of disabled performativity as they relate back to Goffman's work. Suggestions will be given for modifications to Goffman's

original work to enable it to better describe individuals with many intersecting identities as well as directions for future research of disabled experiences.

An Initial Evaluation of Goffman's Work

Goffman (1959) highlights many of the key concepts of his theory within his first chapter on "Performances". In this initial set-up, Goffman tends to universalize his statements, indicating that they apply to all types of individuals whether privileged or marginalized, whether in the United States or across the world, whether the person is thriving or suffering. While Goffman recognizes each group may perform with different motives, he fails to deeply acknowledge that the ability to perform is itself a privilege and one which is not afforded to many individuals with disabilities.

An early example from Goffman illustrates this point. In the first chapter, Goffman (1959) discusses a "natural movement back and forth between cynicism and sincerity" in which there exists a "kind of transitional point that can be sustained on the strength of a little self-illusion" (pp. 21). Yet claims of this nature are vastly more complex for an individual with a disability whether physical, mental, or developmental. Beginning with the simpler case of someone with noticeable physical disabilities, those disabilities will be instantly observed by anyone interacting with that person. The individual with the disability doesn't necessarily have the privilege of "self-illusion," at least with respect to their disability, as there are finite physical limitations to their capacities. As a result, for these individuals, there is a much more reactive component to their interactions. In other words, individuals must somehow decide that, given that their disability will inevitably be others' first impression, how will they react in social situations? An array of reactive mechanisms exists to minimize the person's disability from indicating ability via other means (such as eloquent speech or charisma) to making

self-deprecating jokes to establish a sense of comfort with regard to their disability. None of these acts have the ability to proactively shape the initial impression, but rather anticipate other parties' impression-making and react in order to reformulate those preliminary judgments in a more positive light.

Goffman's first chapter proceeds to lay out several other fundamental concepts that guide the rest of his book. For instance, Goffman (1959) presents notions like the "front", "dramatic realization", "idealization", "expressive control", and "mystification," yet each of these core concepts substantially differs for those with physical disabilities (pp. 22, 30, 34, 51, 67). As an example, Goffman (1959) briefly discusses how "appearance and manner may tend to contradict each other" and that even when breaking molds, one must simply select among "several well-established fronts" (pp. 27). For individuals with disabilities, much more tension inherently exists in these interactions than for able-bodied individuals. Mainstream society sets very low expectations for people with disabilities, meaning that individuals with disabilities who achieve conventional measures of success must continually justify themselves to others. One normative assumption that frequently occurs is that the person succeeded due to others' pity in lieu of their own merit. As a result, appearance and front may occasionally jar for most individuals, there is an almost constant dissonance for people with physical disabilities.

For disabled individuals, similar tensions pervade Goffman's other foundational concepts, and these issues only accumulate further with the progression of Goffman's argument. For instance, much of Goffman's later discussion hinges on the notion of a team— "a set of individuals whose intimate co-operation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained" (pp. 104). As such, he discusses the intricacies of roles one can play both inside and outside of the team, yet he doesn't directly acknowledge the challenges that

individuals, such as those with disabilities, face in initial team formation. As a consequence of ostracization and rejection, people with disabilities must struggle much more to present a unified front due to the lack of fellow team members. This failure to operate in larger social settings and associations compounds their difficulties in individualized and personalized interactions.

Most of this analysis has emphasized the failure of Goffman's work to fully depict the lives of those with physical disabilities, yet ramifications can be even more severe for those with mental or developmental disabilities. Part of the challenge stems from much of mainstream society's refusal to validate those types of disabilities, instead imagining that individuals can simply choose to alter their behavior. For these people, their disability ensures that the types of conventional realignment Goffman discusses in his chapter on "Communication Out of Character" are frequently impossible. Goffman elaborates to describe "unmeant gestures, inopportune intrusions and faux paus" as being "sources of embarrassment and dissonance" which "threaten" the "reality sponsored by the performers" (pp. 210, 212). This conclusion may not be accurate for people with severe mental or developmental disabilities who often either realize a behavior that they cannot control or fail to recognize violations of societal norms entirely.

A 2017 study of friendships for adolescents with autism provides an example of how these dynamics can function in real life. Psychologists O'Haban and Hebron (2017) studied three students with autism who all "expressed a desire for friendship and reported having experienced loneliness" (pp. 2). For one of the students, Max, a school resource officer reported that, "Talking to people, being with people; he does try to, he probably tries too hard, which is why he annoys people so much because he doesn't understand the rules…and he's very immature in the ways he tries to interact" (p. 16). This immaturity, which according to Goffman's theory would

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serve as an occasional source of embarrassment for developmentally typical individuals, determines Max's constant state of being. The desire for team formation and peaceful coexistence remains, but, for individuals like Max, the actualization is near impossible.

These relationship dynamics often deteriorate over time as individuals realize that they cannot perform in a way that enables them to develop meaningful friendships. For Aaron, another student with autism, his support worker commented that, "He's…become more socially isolated…because of a developing awareness that [other students are] not very nice to him, without a developing awareness of how to change that relationship" (pp. 17). Goffman's ideas, which center around individuals developing a basic framework of the world and adapting their performances accordingly, fail to function for individuals like Aaron who develop an increasing comprehension of others but remain unable to alter their own behavior. Eventually this disconnect between understanding and behavior leads to a more general result that for individuals with autism, "older age is associated with a greater risk of friendships becoming less reciprocal" (pp. 17). Consequently, while developmentally typical individuals may be able to realign and recover from embarrassment, people with developmental disorders frequently remain in a state of isolation and confusion as they fail to reach their goals of team formation.

This initial evaluation of Goffman's work in light of the experiences of individuals with disabilities indicates the need for a modified paradigm for disabled performativity. People with disabilities often feel the same desire to perform but lack the ability, struggle with initial impression management, and must overperform to counterbalance their disabled identities. In order to glean deeper understanding of how Goffman's theories can be reinterpreted in light of disabled experiences, the next section turns to Goffman's work on stigma and violation of social norms.

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Goffman's *Stigma* and its Relation to Disabled Performativity

Goffman begins his 1963 work, Stigma, by expressing notions of stigma as part of society's "means of categorizing persons" which manifests itself in "a language of relationships" (pp. 2-3). Goffman further elucidates these "relationships" by examining "mixed" social interactions between able-bodied, neurotypical individuals and people with disabilities who must maintain a constant cautiousness due to the uncertainty of others' reactions (pp. 13-16). These notions of uncertainty and ambiguity have been previously discussed as contradicting Goffman's prior work on performance and performativity, for stigmatized individuals have highly constrained choices in how they present themselves to others.

Goffman later explores the realm of personal identity and documentation which help to provide a more institutional framework for disability and performance. He provides the example of "British ex-mental patients" who are unable to succeed "as ordinary job applicants" because of "unstamped gaps" on their "National Insurance cards" (pp. 61). These individual interactions which have been discussed then transform into institutionalized labels and designations of disability. This institutionalization results in blocking disabled individuals from performing certain societal roles or achieving conventional success even if they are capable of doing so.

Goffman later pivots back to more informal judgment systems via his discussions of in-group and out-group identity in which society's "tactful acceptance" has predefined limits. Goffman presents the example of a heavily disabled man who sought to climb stairs to a restaurant on his knees only for the waitstaff to tell him that the establishment couldn't accommodate someone like him (pp. 120-121). Goffman indicates that these dynamics lead to what he labels as "phantom normalcy"—one must simultaneously feign normality and keep

enough distance from others that they lack the closeness to fully observe the individual's struggle or difficulty.

A personal example of this phenomenon helps to further elucidate some of these dynamics. Around a semester ago, I was at a dining hall with a friend with a visible physical disability and another friend who doesn't have this disability. The friend with the disability was attempting to get food for himself which provoked a response from the dining hall worker, "Why don't you get your able-bodied friend to help you?" This moment perfectly illustrates Goffman's discussions of stigma and its relations to performativity. This friend was attempting to perform an everyday task which demanded a higher level of exertion than it would require without a disability. Yet the comment from the dining hall worker recalled him from this moment of normality to a state of being othered—a reminder that he was not "normal" from this person's perspective. These kinds of attempts to manage impressions and fit within societal conventions are frequently thwarted for people with disabilities by individuals who constantly remind them of their purported limitations.

One final vital concept that Goffman (1963) discusses and which relates to performativity is the notion of professionalization and the "normal-deviant" (pp. 130). Goffman indicates that when some stigmatized individuals climb into professional society, they may split themselves between "the ideals of the normal" when representing themselves to mainstream society and "native dialect, gesture, and expression in humorous caricature of their identity" when engaging in in-group interactions (pp. 134-135). A few of Goffman's points have relevance here—the first being that the process of professionalization is frequently sanitized such that only people who can feign normalcy relatively well can reach privileged positions within societal structures. FDR provides a prominent historical example as he sought to conceal his disability from the public

sphere in order to maintain his grasp of the presidency. Secondly, Goffman's work on performance may inform his ideas on stigma which may not be entirely accurate. Rather than people attempting a "humorous caricature," an alternative and more plausible theory is that individuals with disabilities simply change the nature of their performance based on the context in which they find themselves.

This evidence indicates that Goffman's own work on stigma is highly applicable to his ideas on performance and self-presentation, yet Goffman himself mostly failed to explicitly establish those interconnections. While stigmatized individuals, such as those with disabilities, still attempt to perform normalcy, both individual and institutional constraints greatly limit their agency.

Contemporary Work in Disability Studies and Performance

Since Goffman's works on performance and stigma, contemporary research has further developed ideas of how performance and self-presentation apply to disabled identities. For instance, Darling (2013) discusses the new realm of social media and how it enables some individuals with disabilities to conceal those identities in that sphere (pp. 100). Consequently, disabled individuals may change self-identification and presentation when interacting online even more than able-bodied, neurotypical people. Darling (2013) then moves to discuss "performativity" research within the realm of gender and calls for similar investigations into the under-investigated area of disability (pp. 103). Performativity is still a relatively new framework for viewing these issues but one which has significant potential for a better understanding of disabled experiences.

Other contemporary research on this topic is contained in the 2005 anthology *Bodies in Commotion: Disability & Performance*. For instance, Tanya Titchkosky in her essay "Looking Blind" highlighted her experiences with others perceiving her as blind in spite of her ability to see. For instance, she describes an experience of taking her friend's guide dog home on the subway. A man upon observing the dog assumed blindness, took her arm, and pulled her towards the subway. Titchkosky (2005) discusses her refusal to say the words "I can see" even as she tried to assert her own competence in general terms to the man as it would violate a "taken-for-granted norm of public life…that you are who you appear to be" (pp. 220-221). This experience accompanies other even more drastic examples in which Titckhosky's own friends treated her as blind due to her appearance despite knowledge of her sightedness. Titchkosky concludes her piece by reflecting on the "liminality" and "in-betweeness" of disability in which individuals occupy "a limbo between the expectations of normality and the necessity of alterity" (pp. 225, 227). Titchkosky's experiences and ultimate conclusion fit well within the established framework of Goffman's *Stigma* as it relates to performativity (i.e. disabled individuals have complex relationships to normality in which they attempt to enact the normal and mainstream but struggle to do so successfully eventually occupying a "[liminal]" space).

In "Disrupting a Disembodied Status Quo," Connolly and Craig (2005) describe similar dynamics in an invisible theater project. In a large introductory disability studies lecture, the instructor had someone with a chronic pain disability walk into class slowly and sit down. The man then interrupts the class to ask the teacher to make the font size bigger as he cannot read it. She refuses and suggests that he moves closer; meanwhile, another student is scripted to make a demeaning comment about the person (pp. 247-248). Afterwards the class debriefed and discussed "the inconvenience, messiness, and uncontrollable character of disability" which

starkly differs from "institutional" norms and expectations of "pace, productivity, and unquestioned uniformity" (pp 250-251). These students' struggle to grapple with this "messiness" indicates the extent to which institutional norms have become ingrained within them. Those with disabilities experience significant burdens in having to perform in accordance with those norms and ensure others' comfort even when they are not capable of doing so as already discussed with Goffman's notion of phantom normalcy.

Conclusion: Towards an Intersectional Theory of Performativity and Self-Presentation

One of the essays in *Bodies in Commotion* adds additional nuance to the mechanisms of disability by analyzing it in conjunction with gender expression. The essay—Manderson and Peake's "Men in Motion"—discusses how men struggle with disabled identities through losing their sense of masculinity and sexuality. Rather than assuming the traditional masculine position of control, men found themselves being objectified and losing status upon acquiring a disabled identity (pp. 236-238). Manderson and Peake discuss paraplegic sports as one mechanism through which men can regain a sense of control over both their bodies and masculinities (pp. 240-241).

The wider point to be extrapolated from this essay is that humans are complex composites of many backgrounds and identities. As a consequence, performing disability will manifest itself in very distinctive ways depending on the individual's other attributes/identifiers and the community in which they reside. To truly understand disabled performativity or racial performativity or class performativity or gender performativity, one must invoke a nuanced, intersectional framework which recognizes that the individual is not confined to merely a single identifier.

Not only should future researchers maintain awareness of intersectional identities, but they should also reflect critically on ways in which performativity can interact with other sociological and psychological constructs. One such notion that has received significant attention in recent years is that of "stereotype threat" in which individuals tend to conform to stereotyped expectations of themselves (American Psychological Association 2016). These types of frameworks and constructs could make a significant impact on the future of performativity research. Using the example of stereotype threat, the combination of these two constructs could enable a deeper understanding of the mechanisms which lead individuals to subconsciously perform certain stereotypes.

Ultimately, the application of concepts like performativity and self-presentation to identifiers such as disability continues to be a relatively new area of study. This paper indicates some of the challenges of this research and ways in which Goffman's original notions of performance must be adjusted for those living with disabilities. Future research should examine these questions with a greater variety of intersectional lenses in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of disability issues.

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