**Theory of Self (Goffman 1959)**

Goffman described in his foundational work on self-presentation

offer useful conceptual tools for a radical engagement with the social significance of selfying.

*Goffman: the problem of reality*

Goffman is usually remembered for his study on the presentation of the self, but the point that is neglected is that the problem of presentation emerges from a deeper problem that has to do not with the strategies of the self, but with what I would call the ‘problem of reality’. From a social constructionist perspective, reality is a problem because, being socially constructed, it challenges the individual with the problem of integration or exclusion. The individual seeks reassurance about his or her sense of reality before s/he can develop effective strategies of integration or ‘presentation of the self’. The perceived success of these strategies, in return, reinforce the sense of reality, contributing to what Berger and Luckman call ‘objectification’ and ‘internalization’ of the social world (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

The fear of isolation, thus, is the fundamental reason why people seek intersubjective reassurance about some basic features of the reality they live in and, in turn, this reassurance is a precondition for the development of effective strategies of integration. This fear and the measures taken to address it are core problems that Goffman discusses in his main texts, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1959), *Asylum* (Goffman, 1961), *Stigma* (Goffman, 1963), and *Frame Analysis* (Goffman, 1974). My argument is perhaps more convincing if one looks at Goffman’s publication history in reverse: from the problematization of the sense of the real, to the role of social institutions, to the ‘strategies’ individuals adopt to reassures themselves, to fit it and, in practice, to live in society.

In *Frame Analysis* Goffman developed a method to study individual-society relationships in which he avoids the ontological trap of a single reality. Referring to the works of William James and Alfred Schutz, Goffman suggested that what counts for social analysis is not the

nature of reality but the conditions at which a given state of affairs is considered as ‘real’ or, more precisely, as part of a reality individuals cannot ignore (Goffman, 1974, p. 2).

*Asylum* is the text in which the concerns about the relationship between the individual and society are most explicit. Individual agency can be effaced not as a result of a totalitarian ideology, but by the mere working of administrative logic applied to the management of crimes or deviance. Here the problem of adaptation is seen on its negative, the problem of non- or mis-adaptation, and against the background of the relationship between the individual and society as this is defined by the coordinates of prescriptions and sanctions: what is expected and the sanctions that applies if expectations are not met.

In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman problematized the individual’s strategies to adapt and, by adapting, getting a chance to affect social reality. In this strategy, the persona is a fundamental tool to protect the individual from the risks associated with society and the real: from the possibility that social institutions become a threat (like in Asylum) and from the uncertainty about what is real, or the intersubjective grounds that make understanding and social life possible at all. The ‘presentation of the self’ is not so much about ‘faking’ but more about the possibility for individuals to be aware of and participate on common grounds that, while establishing roles, conventions, etc. also constitute the practical possibility of mutual understanding and, ultimately, coordinated action. Compared to Debord’s ‘spectacle’, where social change is virtually impossible, Goffman’s ‘theatrical performance’ is a symbolical form of communication for the social negotiation of change.

Since the time when Goffman wrote his texts, the ‘digital turn’ in the social construction of reality has brought about transformations that make the ‘problem of the real’ more acute: reality more elusive, conventional strategies of integration less effective and ultimately the fear of isolation more intense.

If Goffman is concerned about the ‘problem of the real’ and the perils of oppression associated with it,

**Social Construction (Gergen)**

For Gergen, Social Constructionism is a movement that collects ideological, literary and epistemological forms of criticism of the dominant orders (Gergen, 2011, p. 109) and is based on three sets of shared, core tenets concerning the social origins of knowledge, the centrality of language and the politics of knowledge (Gergen, 2011, pp. 109-110). Within the framework of Social Constructionism, the study of the social construction of the self focuses on three main aspects:

“establishing the self as a social construction…..specific social processes in which the conception of the self is embedded and the …. critical assessment of the cultural and political outcomes of traditional beliefs in the self”. (Gergen, 2011, p. 110)

they are subject to friends’ criticisms, liking, additional tagging, and further sharing in ways that are not necessarily within our control as authors or users”. (Cover, 2016, p. xviii)

“….the subject is produced through responding to the invitation to participate in the act of interpellation, not merely confirming identities through the taking and distribution of selfies, but through articulating that interpellation, self-managing the process on behalf of, through and within discourse”. (Cover, 2016, p. xvii)

**Selfies and narcissism**

For Cover:

“Selfies are interesting here as an example of a way in which the ubiquity of digital communication, media, and technologies have an impact on how we think about, perform, articulate, and engage in identity practices as social norms,… Selfies, then, become part of the regime of articulating selfhood through selectivity, but they are not without critique, since

**Selfies and narcissism**

**Selfies and body image**

**Positive**

**Negative**

**Biomedicalization**

**Surveillance**

Rettberg, Jill Walker. “Written, Visual and Quantitative Self-Representations.” In *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves*, edited by Jill Walker Rettberg, 1–19. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137476661_1>.