

2019 02.003 HASS

Assignment 3

James Raphael Tiovalen

Singapore University of Technology and Design

SUTD 2019 02.003 HASS Assignment 3

In the study of the self, Goffman proposed an interesting dramaturgical perspective¹ on the presentation of the self. On the other hand, Freud suggested a psychoanalytic underpinning of the self. Both of them put forward interpretive theories on the conception of the self, as well as the agencies and consequences of human behaviour. In this essay, I will attempt to analyse and compare the two approaches in understanding the essence of interactions in society.

A possible difference between Freud's and Goffman's theories lies in the ownership of control over our behaviour. Freud believes that how we behave inevitably emerge from the unconscious, while Goffman believes that these considerations in the mind are deliberate. Freud assumes that the innate decisions of the id, ego and superego are ungovernable. A person's childhood has a significant impact on how the id, ego and superego function. If issues arise during childhood, they could irreversibly affect the person's psychology with neurosis, whereby the balance of the Freudian trinity is out of order. This neurosis lies within the unconscious and thus this is why it takes a significant amount of effort and time to heal people with mental problems. Meanwhile, Goffman assumes that we can consciously alter our behaviour as we put on a theatrical performance in front of others. We purposefully put on different masks as we explore different stages in society. While the masks are preliminarily determined by the society in unanimity depending on the stage, as we grow up, we learn of which mask to wear during the appropriate social performances. For us to be capable to manipulate our behaviour to conduct impression management, we need to consciously weigh the different options and decide which mask to wear. This is why when we encounter new social situations, we feel unsure of how we should act, which would sometimes lead to the manifestation of inappropriate behaviour. This is where Freud and Goffman differ.

¹ Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Preface. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.

Another difference between Freud's and Goffman's theories is the definition of a true identity of the self. Freud believes that there is an inner self that consists of the constant interaction between the id, ego and superego, while Goffman believes that there is no true self. Freud believes that this personality of the self is strongly shaped by events that happened during childhood when we are still developing through the psychosexual stages. Without satisfactory progress through the different stages, a person might undergo fixation which might be caused by disruptions during childhood. This means that a person's personality is significantly affected by these childhood issues. The possibility of regression as well as Freudian slips² that could reveal the unconscious underlines how Freud believes that everyone has a fundamental personality that develops over time. Meanwhile, Goffman believes that there is no such thing as an innate self and that who we are to others only consists of the different masks that we wear at different social performances. As we gain experience in acting, we become more skilful at self-monitoring, as well as picking up cues from others on how to behave. We become more perceptive of our behaviour and we might even develop improvisation skills as we calibrate our behaviour accordingly. This volatile property of the self implies that there is no true identity or personality of the self. The existence of a true personality is where Freud and Goffman also differ.

While Freud's and Goffman's theories seem to differ by a fair amount, they have similarities too. A possible similarity is the presence of the fear of embarrassment in all social interactions. In Freudian terms, this is depicted in the form of the superego which advocates for the morally acceptable behaviours. This is, in turn, characterised by the intention to conduct impression management based on Goffman. This innate desire to behave appropriately to avoid being judged by other people, by either wearing the correct mask or following the superego, is common for both Freud and Goffman.

² Freud, S. (1991). *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 93. London: Penguin Books.

In conclusion, while I believe that each approach provides a different and useful frame of reference on how the self communes with others in society, I reason that Goffman's theories are more well-established than Freud's theories as Goffman's theories have more concrete empirical pieces of evidence such as surveys and ethnographic data.³ This is understandable as Goffman is a sociologist, not a psychoanalyst. Goffman himself was influenced by Freud's works and by considering other perspectives that were available at his time, Goffman was able to put forth quite convincing well-supported theories. Freud, on the other hand, founded a whole new field of psychoanalysis which did not have a sufficient repository of evidence as he heavily relied on case studies instead. Thus, while Freud's insights are also valuable, it is undeniable that Goffman presented more proper theories to help us understand the self and its interactions with society than Freud.

³ Crossman, A. (2019, January 24). A Biography of Erving Goffman. *ThoughtCo*.

Bibliography

Crossman, A. (2019, January 24). A Biography of Erving Goffman. *ThoughtCo*. Retrieved August 16, 2019, from <https://www.thoughtco.com/erving-goffman-3026489>

Freud, S. (1991). *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. London: Penguin Books.

Goffman, E. (1956). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre.