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PERFORMANCE AND PERSONA: A COMPARATIVE EXPLORATION OF GOFFMAN AND JUNG’S APPROACHES TO PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY.

1 ABSTRACT

The performance of work is the central theme of sociologist Erving Goffman’s key work, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which considers, inter alia, how individuals and groups construct and attempt to control the impression they make on others. Carl Jung’s (1875-1961) relevant concept here is Persona, which in the first half of life allows an individual to develop a public profile, and in the second half can be a constraint, inhibiting creativity and other unlived desires. In this sense, the performance becomes a mask, concealing and imprisoning the individual or group in the dark.

The paper, which is conceptual, summarizes contemporary approaches to professional identity before introducing Goffman, who is often mentioned in this context, and Jung, who is not. Together these two scholars offer insights into the interior and exterior aspects of identity which is here applied to public relations, raising questions, not only about the identity of public relations as a profession, but also about its role in generating a promotional culture with effects on social identity generally.

KEYWORDS: Professional identity; public relations; Goffman; Jung; performance; Persona

2 PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

(Green, 2009) suggests four concepts of ‘professional practice’: the notion of practising a profession, as in medicine or law; the idea of practising professionalism, that is enacting aspects of identity associated with being or been seen as a professional; there is also the moral-ethical quality, the sense of ethical responsibility in one’s practice; and finally in opposition to ‘amateur’ implying some reward for services (pp.6-7). This paper is primarily concerned with the third of these, enacting a professional identity. Green cites Bourdieu’s sociology (1977, 1984), which includes analysis of the social function of professions and offers “a sustained and particularly creative engagement with the problematics and aporias that are involved in trying to understand practice” (Green, 2009b:44). Bourdieu sees practice as a combination of a) habitus b) capital and c) field, each of which is multilayered, and rooted in unconscious, reflexive behaviours, some acquired from past experience, others from present circumstances. *Habitus* is seen as the means by which society reproduces itself (Ihlen, 2007); ‘capital’ comprises knowledge capital, social capital and cultural capital (Adkins and Corus, 2009:204) and ‘field denotes the ‘social space or network of relationships between the positions occupied by actors’ (Ihlen, 2009:65), positions which are partially distributed on the grounds of power or capital. Actors are seen to compete for positions of power within a field. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘fields’ is organised around behaviour and identity, and is particularly relevant to this discussion of professional identity:
identity and professional development entail habituation to a discursive and symbolic field, the production of disciplined bodies, within which must be objectified those ‘durable dispositions that recognise and comply with the specific demands of a given institutional area of activity’ (Sommerlad, 2007:194).

These concepts are well suited to explain and describe the acquisition of power by professional groups and the creation of norms in, for example, law (Sommerlad, 2007), health education (Atkins and Coru, 2009) professional practice (Green, 2009b) and public relations (Ihlen, 2009, Edwards, 2006). Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, the unconscious ways of doing things which only become visible when disrupted is also relevant here. As Edwards (2010:206) puts it

The professional habitus plays a significant role in defining what it is to be “a professional” and, like the other processes that define professional jurisdiction, its character is linked to the political, social and economic circumstances from which the profession has emerged.

She cites Bourdieu’s (2000) observation that new entrants to a profession ‘fall into line with the role ... try to put the group on one’s side by declaring one’s recognition of the rule of the group and therefore of the group itself’ (p. 125, cited in Edwards, ibid). Other writers on professional identity share the social constructionist view of identity; for example, Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts (1997:4) claim that the professional has to ‘navigate the increasingly choppy waters of organisational life’ and that narratives of self are shaped by professional identity, which extends far beyond remuneration, as ‘The ‘I’ cannot talk with the authority of a professional, cannot give an account of itself as a professional, unless the discursive association is prior held and legitimised in the eyes of others’ (ibid).

This sense of professional identity as discursive is shared by Kemmis (2009:29), who distinguishes between objective’ examination of discourses and language from the outside and the ‘subjective perspective of a particular participant in a community of practitioners who attaches particular meaning, significance, values and intentions to their ideas or utterances’. A more detailed socio-cultural approach to identity is proposed by the ‘circuit of culture’ (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, 2007) which borrows concepts from cultural and sociological study (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997) to reconceptualise public relations. They describe identity as ‘meanings given to a particular object or group through the process of production and consumption’ (Curtin and Gaither, 2005:101). Identity is imagined at the individual, organizational and national levels and comprises one in a circuit of ‘moments’ (made up of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation), offering a powerful model of interrelated, continuing, process-based communication with strong foundations in and implications for public relations. This interrelatedness, experiential and fluid approach is closer to that found in identity debates in other professions and also reflects the erosion of borders and status that professions used to enjoy, leading to confusion at all stages of the circuit of culture: images of professions become emptier as identity is eroded, production and consumption of professionalism is located on the external context of management and regulation has become notional, almost empty in the process, a view shared by other writers on professionalism (Broadbent, Dietrich and Roberts, 1997). This blurring is explored in Bauman (2004) who also notes the loss of meaningful identity through class solidarity and its replacement by emphasis on individual attributes like gender and race. While he does not address the role of professions his approach is applicable to the discussion of the question of professional identity in a fast changing or ‘liquid’ world.

Hence the growing demand for what may be called ‘cloakroom communities’ conjured into being... patched together for the duration of the spectacle (p.31).
Most writing on professional roles in recent decades, then, has taken the constructivist approach, locating the professional self firmly in the social world. This is only recently echoed in public relations’ scholarship which has tended to assess roles using management rather than sociological theory. The contribution of above-cited writers like Edwards, Curtin and Gaither has moved this debate on. However, I want to go back a bit, a century in the case of Jung; half a century to Goffman to look at their concepts of social enactment, which I argue represent two ends of the spectrum between the interior and exterior location of identity but which also share common concerns.

3 GOFFMAN’S PERFORMANCE

Goffman explores how individual and team performances are constructed, maintained – and disrupted; he talks about impression management in professions as a ‘rhetoric of training’ (p.46) for example, and explores the gulf between impressions ‘given off’ or consciously intended, and those ‘given’, often very different from the former. Importantly, while most strive to close that gap, it is the disruptions or failures that expose the artifice, revealing, as it were, the scene-shifters and props cupboard. This is not to suggest a manipulative intent, more the mechanisms by which cultural norms are observed and reproduced in professional (inter alia) settings.

When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part. When an event occurs which is expressively incompatible with this fostered impression, significant consequences are simultaneously felt in three levels of social reality (p.242). These levels are those of social structure; interaction and personality (p.243). The first affects teams which may become confused by the disruption; then, audiences may question the individual’s projected performance and indeed legitimacy; finally, the person may find his ego identified with this aspect and the consequences affect ‘his’ sense of self. Finkelstein (2007:101) summarises his key concepts.

Goffman employs the terms ‘face work’, civil inattention, and impression management to describe the different levels of consciousness operating within every social situation. When we overlook breaches in the rules of embarrassing moments, we are engaged with face work. When we perform in the moment and respond predictably, maintaining the rules of exchange but privately and inconspicuously occupying ourselves with other thoughts, then we are practising civil inattention. When we deliberately appeal to the audience and try to influence opinion… Then we are engaged in impression management.

This negotiation is, as she says, disturbing. Effort must be put into preserving one’s own and others’ ‘face’, which is described as the ‘public self-image’, as situations can be divided into face-saving and face-threatening. This is about self-consciousness not self-forgetting (Finkelstein, 2007:112), and again, seems resonant with the 24 news cycle not only about world events but about our own domestic and personal lives. We are increasingly engaged in continuous digital impressment management, selecting images, targeting our publics, updating on our every movement. There’s a webcam backstage now; we are never ‘off’. Finkelstein (2007) places Goffman in a long tradition of questioning the self, citing Descartes and Montaigne for example as explorers of the borders between the inner subjective and outer social self and in particular in the first half of the 20th century from William James onwards. She suggests Goffman’s main contribution was positioning this negotiation as one of anxiety (p.102), a fitting response to his times – and perhaps an explanation of the recent resurgence of interest in Goffman. In this period, the stable universal sense of self that underpinned much
earlier Western cultures has given way to a fragmented, contradictory self, a move heightened by postmodern thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty. The dramaturgical metaphor brought many of these ideas into clear focus; we present different aspects of ourselves in different locations: sometimes backstage preparing; sometimes front of house, performing. Goffman suggests that we search for a part that ‘fits’ and then learn the rules that govern that role. When we, or others, fail, perhaps becoming emotional or over-detached, it is noticed. Curious that Japanese culture is seen as highly formalised, when Anglo-American culture, as Goffman reveals, is as formal as an tea ceremony; only the rules are unwritten.

In many ways, however, the interpretation of Goffman has been instrumental, both addressing and salving this anxiety and transforming Goffman from an observer of social mores to yet another management guru with Charles Atlas-like solutions to modern life. Johansson (2009:120), for example, suggests ‘..to improve the functioning of organisations and their stakeholder relations we will benefit from what Goffman offers’. What Goffman himself reminds us is that the theatre was seen as a metaphor rather than a complete analogy, yielding useful spatial concepts, like front, backstage, setting and so on. Far from instrumental fixes, Goffman offers patient observation – his original research was located in remote communities in the Shetland Isles, noting which visitors received tea, sherry or the treasured whisky and evolving theories of ritual and habit from these minutiae, which he called a microsociology.

Returning to the presentation of the professional, there is a resonance with Bourdieu’s sense of practice, outlined above, in its grounding in everyday routines and unconscious tropes; also in the systematic transfer of required behaviours, very close to Goffman’s reference to professionalism as a ‘rhetoric of training’. What these writers offer is a minute observation of the external construction of an identity, echoing the process whereby the actor learns his or her part, puts on a costume and addresses the audience “in character”. Goffman is not a behaviourist, he does conceptualise the motivation of the actor, who may or may not believe his/her own lines, or pass from self-belief through cynicism to a newly-grounded belief over the course of a career; he cites the trajectory of priests for example.

The other key aspect of Goffman, for this paper, is the precise observation of how presentation is operationalized, at a conscious and unconscious level: the calibrations involved in assessing one’s own and others’ performance skills and adjusting the script accordingly. As Catherine Johansson (2009) explores in her chapter on Goffman and PR, concepts of face, impression management and symbolic interaction are highly relevant for public relations practice and theory, particularly in the context of co-creation understanding of communication. While she finds the most germane implication in interpersonal communication – central to the emerging field of relationship management, I am interested in the broader, societal implications of Goffman’s notion of performance for public relations, with its emphasis on the exterior world and the voracious, ever-changing demands of the audience. Public relations is centrally involved in the creation of appropriate settings, scripts and sets for the key agents. On the ground, practitioners - particularly in the promotional fields – are valued for their ability to stage an event, a launch, put on a show. Every media conference is a spectacle. And more importantly, public relations has expanded in the second half of the 20th century as global culture shifted to a fixation with appearance. This is not just about events but the extraordinary investment in the professional communication of desired messages from all organisations, now central to our contemporary culture. Indeed the CIPR definition of public relations centres on ‘reputation, what you do and what people say you do’. So Goffman’s concerns are public relations’ concerns; the management of impressions is our core business, perhaps marginalised theoretically in the exaltation of strategic communication but nevertheless at the heart of the field.

Before discussing further the wider implications of Erving Goffman’s performance, I want to turn to Carl Jung, who offers is an interior journey into the construction of the self, not
as a contingent, socially-constructed edifice but as an entity drawn from a set of innate, universal components. Comparing and contrasting the two enables an inner and outer perspective on the self. First, the Jungian psyche must be introduced.

4 JUNG’S PERSONA

Jung described the public face of the individual as the “persona,” drawing on the Greek masks of ancient drama. Persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, a kind of mask designed to ‘impress and conceal’ and to meet societal demands (CW7/305-9). As the ego gravitates to the public ‘approved’ view, unconscious activity starts to compensate. The personal unconscious is structured around archetypal images, the templates of which are located in the collective unconscious (Jung’s concept of shared human experience). Archetypes are organized in binary opposites in what can be either a creative or destructive tension, for example in the twins of Persona and Shadow, the former containing conscious, ‘approved’ elements of the personality, the latter the repository for all that is feared or despised in the individual. In other writing (eg, xxxx, 2010a and b) I have characterised professions as psychic entities, containing the same elements as the individual psyche, configured, as with individuals, in their own particular way. That such notions can be extrapolated from the individual psyche to the collective of groups, organisations and, here, professions is established by writers like Feldman (2004) and Hede (2007), who explore shadow aspects of organisations. Singer and Kimbles’ (2004) elucidation of cultural complexes (building on Henderson, 1990), offers particularly useful insight into the study of organisational-level psycho-dynamics:

… cultural complexes can be thought of as forming the essential components of an inner sociology (p. 4).

This provides a frame for seeing professions as possessing both sociological and psychological qualities. However the persona should not be viewed as a negative aspect of the psyche; it is essential to the acquisition of social skills and status and it also evolves over time; what Stein (1998) calls a ‘competent’ ego will negotiate a path between social expectations and inner needs, as it executes its object-relations function. When these functions deteriorate, fail to adapt to new situations or are not developed, help may be required.

The sociological insights in this approach make it reasonable to suggest that a profession may contain the persona functions in its relationship to society through participation in what Wernick (1991) called the ‘promotional’ culture. As with the individual, the danger to the profession occurs through over-identification with the idealized, persona aspects and denial of shadow material. There are resonances here with the promotional aspects of public relations practice; while core texts emphasise symmetrical communication, practitioners often see themselves as advocates, with implications both for public relations’ professional identity and its ethics (see xxxx, 2012 and Baker, 2008), as PR people are employed in many sectors to present an optimized version of the organisation. Jung is clear this is a perfectly reasonable aspect of social interaction; the danger is when the un-represented aspects are not merely omitted from promotional activities but excised from the collective consciousness of the organisation. The other danger worth highlighting here is that the Persona function is the object-related, social-orientated aspect of the psyche; Jung is always interested in what happens when one half of a binary pair expands to exclude the other. It does not go away; the more it is repressed, he argues, the more powerful it becomes. Raising the question about current priorities in western societies: what exactly is being promoted and what forgotten?
5 COMPARING JUNG AND GOFFMAN

There are interesting convergences in Jung and Goffman’s work, including phenomenological approaches to their, very humane, observations. Goffman’s face is very close to the Jungian Persona, the public self-image of the individual and a key element in constructing an identity. Both sense the reverse of that image too; Goffman describes practices and routines which represent the ‘underlife’ of organisations, parallel to the Jungian Shadow which contains the hidden aspects of the idealised presentation of the individual, group or, here, profession. Jung’s psyche is envisaged as the alchemical container for transformation; for Goffman, the metaphor is the stage – illuminating the tension is between front and back stage. Both imply multiplicity of self, recognising the impossibility of the fixed, stable personhood that features so strongly in post-Enlightenment narratives of self.

However, I do not wish to gloss over the differences; indeed, they are of particular interest when considering the operation of professional identity. The crucial separation is that the sociological explanation of human interaction is located in the material plane of text, speech, physical gesture and the Jungian explanation of the psyche is located in the interior, in the world of dreams, play, imagination. They study similar manifestations of identity – the construction of a self for consumption by the social world – but where Goffman brushes against the unconscious in his explanations of intended and unintended impressions, Jung dives right in, seeking to discover what is being concealed, waiting to be expressed. Goffman describes fitting in; Jung argues for the wholesale rejection of the social self in the journey to realise the deepest aspects of the eternal Self. Sociologists tend not to postulate eternal or universal truths, preferring the contextual and contingent. So Goffman and Jung inhabit different paradigms, despite the convergence of their interests.

6 IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

Goffman and Jung, despite their conflicting worldviews, offer a complementary understanding of the operation, internal and external, of professional identity.

I’ve written recently (xxxx2012) about the competing identities of public relations in relation to ethics, particularly the schism between the professional identity of ethical guardian and servant of society beloved of texts and professional bodies and the ‘cab-for-hire’ model preferred by practitioners. The point here is not to argue about which identity is more valid or ethical but to note the effect of these self-images on the profession; as Curtin and Gaither (2007) make clear, the relationship between identity, representation and ethics (regulation) is inextricable. This discussion generates a double identity for PR: ethical professional engaged in symmetrical communication between organisations and their publics versus professional communicators retained to present their clients in the most acceptable manner. Both of these identities can be seen as performances, though it is the idealised version from Excellence which most resembles a Persona function.

Public relations’ societal role can also be examined by consideration of performance: we have flourished, understanding the rules that Goffman so forensically examines, assuaging the anxiety of disruption, restoring reputation. But Jung asks, what if western culture has so identified with its Persona, that we have forgotten what lies behind the mask?
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