



My Performed Identity

Jeremy Cover

Macalester College

In his work on dramaturgical society, Erving Goffman describes the performative aspects of our conception of self in everyday interaction. “[The individual] was viewed as a performer, a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-to-human task of staging a performance; [but also] a character, a figure, typically a fine one, whose spirit, strength, and other sterling qualities the performance was designed to induce” (Goffman 252). Under this interpretation of social interaction, a great deal of importance is placed on the roles that we play in the everyday setting. However, what would be the effect of playing an uncomfortable or unnatural role for a long period of time? How could such roles play out in the formation of personal identity?

Goffman argues that there is no essential self or identity, saying “The self, then, as performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented” (Goffman 252-3). In addition, he holds that “he and his body merely provide a peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time. And the means for producing and maintaining selves do not reside in the peg; in fact these means are often bolted down by society” (Goffman 253). Here is where I begin to have problems

with Goffman’s conceptions of personal agency. While recognizing the importance of situational factors, I can also remember the purposeful construction and maintenance of various identities that I imagine most people engage in during adolescence. What follows then is a half-narrative, half-analysis of my adolescence, focusing on the aspects of agency and situational constraints in my identity performances.

So who is Jeremy Cover? And how the hell did he turn out that way? By running back through my memories of a fractured and often painful high school experience, some things began to come clear. There were certain times during this period that I felt myself playing different roles, acting completely different from one group setting to the next. I believe that this is an essential part of self formation, a phenomenon of experimenting with various roles or identities in order to find one that we feel fits the best. It was not just the norms of the situation that demanded these different performances, I too placed a priority on having compartmentalized myself and adapted to each situation. The only problem for me was that none of my performances felt natural, or even enjoyable. It also left me in the position where I could only act like I actually wanted to by myself and with a few friends. I had to change something, and felt like college was the perfect place to do so. With the change in situational norms and practices, there would be more latitude to create a comfortable performance and role. I do see myself now as more true to one identity, as I am able to present a much more natural and consistent performance of self across situations. This, however, is not the whole picture. At the same time I was wrestling with my own changing identity, there were both structural and physical limitations on the type and character of the identity I have become. Here the ideas of Emile Durkheim concerning differences between societies and what keeps them together are instru-

mental for a better understanding.

I grew up in what I consider to be a small town environment in east Texas. Its description would be similar to a Durkheimian conception of a premodern society, one in which mechanical solidarity meant a strong shared system of values, a limited set of social roles, and an emphasis on conformity in maintaining social order. In such a society “originality is not simply very rare, but it has no place” (Durkheim 135). He describes the role of the individual in such a society: “the individual, being like others, is given no leeway to depart from their collective practices. The individual is integrated mechanically and by force” (Collins and Makowski 98). Throughout my childhood there were strong pressures to conform to an established set of social roles.

Though there was considerable overlap in time between my roles, the first one would have to be that of the church-going, well-behaved, “good kid.” My father is a Presbyterian minister, and in the small town atmosphere this limited my options to either the good kid or the stereotypically rebellious “PK.” Within this system, my role as the good kid would have been the ideal; someone who fully integrated Christian values, hard work, and a desire for the status quo. For a long period of time, especially childhood and early adolescence, I performed this role without any question of its validity or any desire not to do so. It was a natural extension of our family life, which had played a large part in shaping this role and its behaviors. I went to church every Sunday, did well in school, and was an active participant in my church youth group. During this period of time it was one of the few social activities that I engaged in, and I really loved going. At a certain point, though I can’t say I remember when, this performance began to feel hollow. I no longer believed in the things I was saying and doing. You could call it a crisis of faith, but for me it merely seemed like a

role I no longer wanted to play. However, I publicly continued to play along for a long time, and to some extent continue to do so in certain situations. I was very aware though that this was not the type of person I wanted to be, and actively began to seek out a new group or culture I could identify with.

My next stop was my experimentation with heavy metal music. Something about the rage and catharsis of anger it contained especially appealed to me during the frustrating period during 9th and 10th grades when I felt the most alienated and alone. Most people, I’m pretty sure, experience similar feelings at this age. Maybe you did too. The important thing for me was the need for a way to vent this frustration. By listening to the music (bands such as Slipknot and Godsmack) I could enjoy all the screaming and heavy guitars in the privacy of my own room. It became the most secret of my identities, as I had serious problems with the actual culture that went along with it. I couldn’t really imagine performing a goth or hardcore identity, but instead became quite fond of the color black for clothing. This only manifested itself in the steady purchase of mostly black t-shirts and dark colors, a wardrobe trend that can still be seen to some extent in my closet today. I did not go to any concerts, and was actually afraid of those who took on the hardcore identity. In addition, I couldn’t incorporate or even acknowledge this in my school or church performance, as such sentiments would have seemed entirely incongruous. But by being able, and being allowed by accepting parents, to compartmentalize and engage in this small behavior I was able to work through these issues and feelings effectively. At this point I came to the realization that while such music had been helpful, it would not suit me as an identity marker or grouping either.

My next try at a more concrete identity came from my social group experience in high school. It is important to remember

that at the same time as my identity formation, the school's status system was very important in determining where I could be accepted and what identity I could take on. In his book *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids*, Murray Milner Jr. presents a fairly accurate portrait of high school hierarchical status systems that closely resembled the situation at my school. He states: "Status systems vary in the degree to which evaluations are shared across groups or only apply within a certain group ... some status systems are relatively hierarchical (i.e., there is a relatively widespread agreement about how individuals and groups are ranked)" (Milner 34). He also stresses the importance of certain aspects in interaction: "one key source of status is conformity to the norms of the group" (Milner 30). In our status hierarchy the preps were on top, football was worshipped as the only important sport, and there was little status to be gained from the activities that I participated in. As someone who got good grades and didn't hang out with the cool kids, my options were limited. My guess is that I would have been labeled as a nerd, and as such was afforded a lower social status. Competition for the higher status positions was virtually already done; most had already been decided through the groups that were formed in elementary school. However, around the end of 10th grade, six or seven people and I (some friends from before, some new) formed a close-knit group where I felt accepted and comfortable. Our position in the high school status system was somewhere near the middle, a group of choir kids that most people would have generally ignored. Within this group there was a focus on consumerism and a near obsession with pop culture. I had never really had either of these things, so at this point I began to engage in both more extensively. For the first time I tried to wear more fashionable clothing (never really worked) and pay more attention to the popular music and television. Fortunately, I thought all

the music was crap and instead began to develop a taste for what I would consider good music. At the same time, though, I still participated in the conversation and watched the same TV and movies as my friends. As I got more comfortable within the group, I became more socially self-confident and more able to express my feelings and attitudes. I began to feel dissatisfied with this identity too, and though I still liked my friends, I found it unnatural to perform this dominant culture-centered identity.

While this occurred within the group, my school identity did not change much. I was still the smart kid who didn't go to any of the parties; the only difference was that I now had a group of friends that most people found to be a little annoying. If I was closer to a more natural self performance, I had not found it yet. I was still focused on performing an acceptable identity, and still searching for what this would be. The problem as I saw it was the fixed nature of identity in the small town setting. Durkheim himself discusses this phenomenon: "Most people are like each other...there is a very strong collective conscience, since people have many ideas in common from their common experiences" (Collins and Makoowski 98). People could only change so much, and this change was dismissed and ignored to a large extent. The only way I could change my social role in the overall hierarchy was to find a new setting in which to operate. Thus as I prepared to go to college, I began to think about the possibilities it would entail.

My idea was that college contained the possibility for a reinvention of self. I would no longer be pigeonholed into a certain widely accepted conception of my identity; I could perform in any manner I wished. The situation at school would make all the difference. Compared to my hometown, being on my own at a school far away sounded like a dream come true. I wouldn't know anybody there, and living away from

my parents purported untold freedoms of identity and self-expression. The idea is similar to that of Durkheim's modern society, in that there would be more of a form of organic solidarity and social regulation in the atmosphere of a big city. In such societies, "People experience very different life circumstances and thus have much less in common with each other" (Collins and Markus 98). This has strong effects on individuality and personal identity as well, "Each individual is more and more acquiring his own way of thinking and acting, and submits less completely to the common corporate opinion" (Durkheim 137). The division of labor in these societies means that people must take on very different roles and occupations in order for society to function. As someone who would be playing the part of a college student, I looked forward to the different set of norms and practices that would go along with this social role. In addition, I hoped for looser cultural norms and the lessening of traditional restrictions and values that had shaped my childhood experience.

My plan was to take on some unnamed but perfect identity and group at college. Through the experimentation with different identities in high school, I at least had a better idea of what I didn't want to be. This self awareness led me to conceive of a more comfortable performance to play. In order to do so, I decided to change both my appearance and personality. I grew some sweet facial hair and planned to be much more outgoing and friendly. Once I arrived at college, I began to put the new self into action. The first two weeks were as crazy and amazing for me as I imagine they are for most people. I made great friends immediately, shaved my beard and mustache because I looked too much like a serial killer, and generally basked in the glow of a more natural identity performance. In this situation, the pressures were not those of church and family, but meeting people and having a good time. I played my role for all

it was worth and loved it. But once again, I found that I was not entirely comfortable with my new identity. I was still a pretty introverted person, and gradually began to settle down into a much smaller group of friends. While I was more comfortable with this role than I had been with the ones before, I began to notice more of the performative aspects of this new identity.

First, there were the new norms and rituals of my group to adjust to. I never drank or partied in high school, and the group I found myself in did both. Most of them had since high school or before, so I began to engage in similar behaviors. We also engaged in routinized activities such as consistent mealtimes, playing cards in our lounge, and spending copious amounts of time shooting pool and hanging out in the game room on the bottom floor of the dorm. We had a group nickname (inappropriate to repeat here) as well as nicknames for most of the members. Group interactions were different too, mealtimes and social activities took on an entirely different pattern and topic of conversation. On reflection it all strikes me very obviously as a role and carefully orchestrated performance and identity. The true difference between this identity and the ones before it was my personal acceptance of my performance, and an agreement with group practices and orientation. Thus I have trouble characterizing it as a truer form of self rather than a firmer belief in my own performance.

What brings me to this conclusion is essentially the arbitrary way in which my group identity was formed. The particular college I went to undoubtedly had an effect, but my decision to attend it was based specifically on how I felt it fit in with my personality and desires, so this can be seen as an extension of personal identity. However, at the school I was placed on a small, all-male floor, and almost all of my friends lived on the same floor. This can easily be explained by the concept of propinquity, the idea that we are scientifically more like-

ly to become friends with those that we live closest to and interact with the most. If I had ended up living on a different floor, I believe I would have had an entirely different set of friends and group identity. I am still close to these people, and have lived in a house with three of them for more than a year. What is interesting to consider here is how much not only the group identity, but also my personal identity, has been shaped by these specific people. My current interactions are shaped by this grouping, as well as many of the decisions I have made. For instance, living in the house has spawned its own sort of culture, and the deviant behavior which occurs there is widely known. Even my self-concept has undoubtedly been influenced by this group membership, as the solidarity expressed on our "Team Kamchatka" intramural sports teams can attest.

At the same time, there were other macro-level forces working in the shaping of my identity. There are institutional constraints at college that have focused my academic efforts into a major field of study, which happens to be sociology. I took the classes and it appealed to me, but studying concepts such as this one have had an influence on both my world outlook and personal understanding. A more thorough examination of the ideas of personal identity and agency in my performance of studying sociology has led me to reconceive not only my identity formation experiences in high school, but also think about how a future work role and performance will continue to shape these processes. In addition, the type of school chosen has had an effect on the identities available. By attending a small, liberal-arts college there were a different range of identities than would be found at a state school. And, as I mentioned before, the role of the student throughout our society is structured very differently than the role of people outside of the college system, as it is focused on the re-creation of the professionalized middle class

through an intense mind and identity shaping period of time. Within this time at college a certain culture and set of acceptable identities is formed, but at the same time the emphasis is on preparation for the next set of roles and possibilities encountered when entering the work force.

The idea of identity formation discussed, then, is one of an array of performed identities, each of which leads to the refinement or change of our conception of self. When a certain grouping and performance doesn't seem to be natural or is difficult to internalize, then another more natural performance can be taken up. This suggests two important and seemingly contradictory concepts.

First, identity is fluid, and can be affected greatly by the situation and performances we engage in. A fluid identity allows the possibility to experiment with different constructions and wear the many different hats of personal interaction. Second, however, the idea that some performances are more natural than others suggests some essential form of personal identity. If there is an acceptance or rejection of a certain performance, then there must be something essential in a person that agrees or disagrees with each specific role. To bring in Goffman's metaphor, there must be some shape to the peg that our identities are hung on, so that some roles can be hung on it while others cannot.

While this poses more questions than it answers, I have the feeling that concerns such as these are too metaphysical to be answered anyway. What we are left with then, is merely a better understanding of personal identity and our own important, if limited, role in constructing our current version of self. For me, personally, I can see the effect of the roles I have played and the situations in which they were performed on shaping not only my interactions, but also how the refinement or rejection of each successive identity influenced how I conceive of myself today.

REFERENCES

- Collins, Randall, and Michael Makowsky. 2005. "Dreyfus's Empire: Emile Durkheim," *The Discovery of Society*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1964. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.
- Milner, Murray, Jr. 2004. *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*. New York: Routledge.