

# Identity

Sociological perspectives

STEPH LAWLER

polity

# 6 Masquerading as ourselves: self-impersonation and social life

## Introduction: between semblance and substance

People in the West conventionally counterpose *being* an (authentic) identity against *doing* an identity (performing). While the former is assumed to be an expression of 'who we are, really', the latter is usually assumed to be playing a part: a 'false' expression, denying, negating or concealing 'who we are really'. When contestants leave the 'Big Brother' house, for example, they often claim that the *other* contestants were 'acting' or 'wearing masks', while they, on the contrary, were always 'being themselves'. The distinction rests on an assumption that it is possible – and indeed desirable – for one's 'true self' simply to emerge. When a gap is seen to exist between doing and being – or semblance and substance – then the person is liable to be accused of pretension, inauthenticity or 'acting a role'. It is taken, therefore, that semblance and substance ought to coincide. If semblance does not match substance, that is because of some dissembling – some attempt to deceive others, perhaps to make them believe that we are nicer/more interesting/more virtuous than we 'really are'.

Certainly, it is acknowledged that most of us will don 'masks' at certain points – perhaps from self-preservation – but there is assumed to a real person 'behind' the mask. In most cases, this 'real person' is assumed to be more authentic than the 'mask' or 'masquerade'. To be 'acting' is understood to be acting inauthentically. Alison Young describes semblance and substance as 'two orders of being' that (it is assumed) need to be kept distinct. When they are not kept distinct, she argues, there is a 'misidentification of appearance and reality' (Young,

1996: 112). Reality, of course, is seen to inhere in substance (who we are really) rather than in semblance (who we appear to be). Concerns around such a gap were rather brutally exploited by tabloid press reportage of what became known as 'the Bulger case' in the United Kingdom in 1993. In this case, two 10-year-old boys found guilty of murdering a toddler, James Bulger, were depicted as 'fiends' whose 'evil' nature was masked by their *appearance* as 'normal' schoolboys (an appearance reinforced by the school-photograph-type snapshots of those boys which were used by the media).

Young argues that reportage presents the boys in the following terms.

They *appear* to be children but are not: they are more like evil adults or monsters in disguise. Evil is the lack of correspondence between appearance and being: Thompson and Venables [the killers] *appear* to be children but *are not*. James Bulger, on the other hand, *appears* child-like and is the quintessence of childhood. His innocence consists in the absolute correspondence between his image and his substance. (Young, 1996: 115, emphasis in original)

This grim example centres on one manifestation of a much broader social and cultural preoccupation with authenticity. It is a troubling issue when there is deemed to be a gap between semblance and substance. The trouble itself centres on anxieties about authenticity. Yet ways of resolving this 'trouble' are not straightforward. Certainly there is a belief that the outer form *ought* to express the 'inner self', but there are examples throughout Western culture (and beyond) of occasions where the outer form is represented as *less* attractive than the inner self.

A classic example occurs in folk stories: Cinderella, for example, has her noble birth disguised by being forced to act as a servant and to wear rough, servant's clothing. Yet justice magically prevails as her mother's grave or her fairy godmother (depending on the version) yields clothes suitable for the social position of her birth. Eventually, of course, Cinderella marries the prince because she is the only woman whose foot fits the tiny shoe she has left at the ball (tiny feet, across many cultures, signifying high-class femininity). So Cinderella is 'really' of aristocratic lineage, but her transformation into her 'real self' can only be achieved when semblance matches substance and she is transformed into *looking like* a princess. Cinderella's story disrupts the conventional wisdom that the 'surface' is suspect. In changing her surface appearance, she becomes who she really is.

In contemporary popular culture, the Cinderella theme is continued in television series such as *The Swan* (in the United States) and

*Ten Years Younger* (in the United Kingdom), with the place of the mother or fairy godmother being taken by a series of experts – a ‘personal stylist’, a make-up artist, a cosmetic surgeon, a dentist and a hairdresser. The format of the Channel 4 series, *Ten Years Younger*, for example, is as follows: a middle-aged woman is taken around a town centre, while onlooking members of the public are invited to guess her age. Inevitably, they overestimate her age. The woman is then given a ‘makeover’, involving cosmetic surgery and new clothes, hairstyle and make-up. The first stage is then repeated: members of the public are again invited to guess her age. This time, and just as inevitably, they underestimate it, to the thrilled response of the woman herself and the ‘expert’ who has taken her in hand.

As Gillian Bennett (2005) points out, the woman has of course been made over not once but twice – once ‘downwards’ (harsh lighting, no make-up, bad clothes) and once ‘upwards’, to heighten the before-and-after transformative contrast. But what is perhaps most interesting is the way in which, after the transformation, the woman’s ‘outside’ is presented as at last properly matching her ‘inside’:

Miraculously, the outside now corresponded to the inside where, we were led to believe, a younger, trendier – though up to now invisible – person had always been hiding . . . [N]ow Plain Jane has become Beautiful Barbie, she can fulfil her potential and let her true self emerge from the shadows. (Bennett, 2005: 29)

In other words, the woman becomes who she ‘really’ is by changing the ‘exterior’ manifestation of her self. This is one manifestation of an old and widespread theme, which might appear to be paradoxical – that is, using a mask (in this case the Botox, the hairstyle, the new clothes) to show who you *really* are.

## **Persons, selves and masks**

Wendy Doniger argues that

We assume that masquerades lie, and often they do, at least on the surface. But often masquerades tell a deeper truth, that masquerading as ourselves reaffirms an enduring self (or network of selves) inside us, which does not change even if our masquerades, intentional or helpless, make us look different to others. (Doniger, 2005: 203)

Self-impersonation is a concept I owe to Doniger, and I shall use it throughout the rest of this chapter. While we are accustomed to understanding ‘impersonation’ as meaning fraudulently or otherwise

assuming the characteristics of *another person*, I am using it here to mean a process by which we assume characteristics we claim as our own. Through this process, we become (social) persons through performing our selves. From this perspective, asking who is behind the mask, or investigating the gap between semblance and substance, is not the issue. Rather, what we need to consider is what underwrites a contemporary concern with 'authenticity' in the first place. Not, then, how we can be authentic, but what we mean by authentic, why it is desirable, and what follows from a splitting of behaviours, acts and identities into 'authentic' and 'inauthentic'.

In this emphasis, I am drawing on the work of two social theorists whose work comes from two quite different positions. Erving Goffman (1922–82) was a Canadian sociologist whose work is linked with a symbolic interactionist tradition (even as it transcends symbolic interactionism). The North American feminist philosopher Judith Butler (b. 1956) draws far more explicitly on a European tradition of philosophical inquiry; her influences include Hegel, Freud and Lacan, Foucault, Derrida and Austin (see Salih, 2002). Her work is associated with Queer Theory – a term which refers to a range of perspectives that seek to destabilize the notion of a coherent, unified and stable sexual identity. There are fundamental and important differences between Goffman and Butler, and I discuss these further below. I have found thinking about the differences between them important and provocative in thinking about identity. Nevertheless, they also have important things in common. For both, identity is *always* something that is done: it is achieved, rather than innate. However, identity is not something achieved in isolation; it is part of a social and collective endeavour, not an individual odyssey. Further, it is not a matter of individual 'choice': I cannot simply choose to be one person rather than another (although I may resist the positioning of others). The question, then, is not 'who we are really' but how we achieve identity, under what constraints and in what contexts. These constraints and contexts matter: while both theorists, and perhaps Goffman in particular, have been characterized as emphasizing freedom, agency and the 'micro' world of interaction, it is clear that both see individual actions and responses as part of a wider social order that permits some actions and disallows others.

## Dramas and lives

Goffman is perhaps best known for his dramaturgic metaphor, in which social interaction and social identity are analysed by reference to

theatrical performances. Butler, similarly, is concerned to analyse how we 'do' identities (and she is primarily concerned with gendered identities) through performance. Language, however, fails us in both cases, since 'performance' tends to indicate the adoption of a character more or less at will and, further, the adoption of a character that neither we nor others take to be our own. It is a different thing, after all (even if it were possible), for me to 'be' 'Gertrude' in *Hamlet* than for me to be (the character I and others recognize as) 'Stephanie Lawler'. So it is important to be clear at the outset that neither Goffman nor Butler envisages 'performance' in this way. Nevertheless, it is a useful concept with which to think identity, even if it can lead to misunderstandings.

Goffman's use of the idea of 'regions' in which the self is performed is the source of one such misunderstanding. Goffman argues that in life, as in the theatre, there are 'front stage' and 'backstage' regions. In the front stage regions, we are aware of our audience and in a sense we play to them. Goffman himself uses the example of someone waiting on tables whose every aspect of behaviour is different in the dining room (front stage) from in the kitchen (backstage). Another example is the lecturer who more or less consciously performs 'lecturer' while giving a lecture, but then behaves differently over lunch with friends, and perhaps differently again when alone.

It is sometimes assumed that this therefore means that we are truly 'ourselves' – that we slip the mask – when backstage. Doniger, for example, argues (disapprovingly) that

Erving Goffman speaks of 'the field of public life' wherein our public self must play its part, versus a 'backstage' where the individual can relax before having to put on the theatrical persona; only when we are alone can we take off the mask. Goffman assumes that the private self is unmasked, that we are most genuinely ourselves when alone. (Doniger, 2005: 203–4)

But while Goffman is ambiguous, I disagree with Doniger that he represents the 'backstage' self as 'unmasked' or more 'real'. There are two reasons why I argue this: first, his view of persons and roles, and second, his view of 'role distance'. I outline both next.

## Mask, masquerade and character

Goffman points out that the original use of the word 'person' derives from *persona* – the masks worn by characters in Greek tragedies. In other words, to be a person is to be a mask – to play a role. As Doniger notes, 'The word means "that through [*per*] which the sound [of the

actor's voice, *sona*] is heard". That is, the actor's presence was an integral part of the mask; he animated it, and it animated him' (Doniger, 2005: 203).

Goffman quotes Park, who writes,

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role . . . It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (Park, 1950: 249, quoted in Goffman, 1990: 30)

And

In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons. (Park, 1950: 250, quoted in Goffman, 1990: 30)

Goffman here is arguing for something much more profound than the idea that we play roles: he is arguing that roles, or performances, far from masking the 'true person' (as is commonly assumed) are what *make us persons*. As Hacking comments,

Throughout Goffman's work the idea of *role* is central. But it is not that of an essential person who plays various roles. The roles are not gliding surfaces that conceal the true person. The roles become aspects of the person, some more owned, some more resented, but always an evolving side of what the person is. (Hacking, 2004: 290)

What this suggests is that there is no meaningful sense in which there is a doer behind the deed, or a person behind the mask. We are, as Lemert (1997) comments, copying an imagined original; knowing, more or less consciously, the repertoire of behaviours associated with our roles, we do those behaviours over and over again: they become second nature. We are constantly playing various parts, but what those parts add up to is *ourselves*.

To be a person, then, is to perform being a person. Occasionally, especially in new situations, we might be conscious of this, but mostly we are not. Goffman nevertheless argues that we are continuously doing our various, shifting and possibly contradictory roles. Further, there are many ways in which we try to make the invisible visible in order to dramatize our roles. Put simply, it's no good doing (or being) something if no one recognizes that we are doing (or being) it. So, we

need to spend energy not only on action but also on making that action apparent. For Goffman this is *dramatic realization*, and it rests on impression management. The student being ostentatiously attentive (or bored), the person sighing and looking at their watch as they wait for a late-arriving friend, the mother who pulls an exasperated face as her child misbehaves – all of these are engaging in dramatic realization. This is not to say that they are being fraudulent in any meaningful sense. Rather, it indicates that much of what we do, consciously or not, is done for the benefit of the social group of which we are a part – whether or not there is anyone actually there to witness us. Perhaps this is most obvious when it fails, when people are not recognized in ways in which they want or expect to be recognized.

As Goffman points out, we are accustomed to distinguishing between ‘true’ and ‘false’ performances, but, he argues, that is not where the line should be drawn. The distinction, rather, should be between convincing and unconvincing performances: between those that ‘work’ and those that do not. If this sounds overly cynical, it is important to stress that Goffman is not suggesting that (confidence tricksters aside) people are consciously manipulating or tricking one another. Rather, he suggests, all social life is artificial; it is just that we bracket off some aspects as ‘real’ or ‘true’ and others as unreal and untrue. Further, the ‘performing’ of identity is an *inevitable* process and, indeed, we could hardly be a part of the social world without it. As Ann Branaman observes, for Goffman

The self is a social product in two senses. First, it is a product of the performances that individuals put on in social situations. There is no essence that exists inside an individual, waiting to be given expression in social situations. Rather, the sense of self arises as a result of publicly validated performances. Yet, secondly, even though individuals play an active role in fashioning these self-indicating performances, they are generally constrained to present images of themselves that can be socially supported in the context of a given status hierarchy. Thus, the self is a social product in the sense that it depends upon validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the norms of a stratified society. (Branaman, 1997: xlv)

The self, then, does not *cause* a social situation; it occurs as a *result* of social situations:

The self, then, as a 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, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman, 1990: 245)



Social identity, and indeed social reality, are made through performance.

## The sacred and the profane

So far, I have outlined Goffman's dramaturgic metaphor and its implications for an analysis of the person. I hope it is clear from this that the person, for Goffman, is not *behind* the mask; rather, it *is* the mask. While he does sometimes suggest a rather underdeveloped (and unsocialized) form of self lurking behind or outside the performance, he is also explicit that, while there are occasions on which we are more or less relaxed, and while we tend to behave differently in different settings, this does not mean that we are 'ourselves' in some settings and 'acting' in others. Goffman considers this belief to be an example of a distinction between the 'sacred' (in this context, pure, untainted by the social, true) and the 'profane' (tainted by the social, less true). He challenges what he sees as the 'vulgar tendency in social thought' (Goffman, 1961: 41) to see the sacred as the self which is away from the interaction (the self with one's lover, or by oneself, for example) and the profane as that self 'exacted by society' and obedient to social rules. Instead, he suggests that there is no self which is untouched by or is outside the social world.

Perhaps we can see this most clearly in the concept of role distance. When we distance ourselves from our social roles we are inviting our audience to see us as we (would like them to think we) 'really' are – as when politicians appear on television in casual clothes to emphasize that they are not *only* politicians, and indeed are very like 'you and me'. In this they are engaging in role distance, apologizing, in Goffman's terms, for their entire role. There is an attempt to convince us that we are seeing a more authentic self – an effect also attained, or at least hoped for, when public figures seem to pause to search for words. The writer Alan Bennett – like Goffman an acute observer of everyday life – commenting on the Queen's speech following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, notes that the Queen seemed inauthentic.

HMQ [Her Majesty the Queen] gives an unconvincing broadcast [following the death of Diana, Princess of Wales]: 'unconvincing' not because one doesn't believe her sentiments are genuine (as to that there's no way of telling), but because she's not a good actress, indeed not an actress at all. What she should have been directed to do is to throw in a few pauses and seem to be searching for her words, then the speech would have been hailed as moving and heartfelt. As it is she reels her message off, as she

always does. That is the difference between Princess Diana and the Queen: one could act, the other can't. (Bennett, 2005: 215–16)

The pausing, stammering and hesitating public figure is displaying no more and no less authenticity than her or his counterpart who reads from a script. The performance of role distance is exactly that – another performance.

Role distance is just one example of the ways in which people play multiple roles. Goffman's great insight here is not simply to challenge us to question the dividing line between 'false' and 'authentic', not simply to show how the self escapes and exceeds its roles, not simply to show us that the self is a social product, but to show in detail how we as social actors daily participate in the constitution of such a self and, in the process, make and remake the social every day through our social interaction.

It is possible to see that people do behave in relatively regularized ways, that they develop habits which are relatively idiosyncratic as well as obeying social rules and social 'custom and practice'. If they did not, we would hardly be able to describe someone's actions as 'out of character'. Does this, then, indicate that there really is an essential person behind the mask – underneath it all, as it were?

Ian Hacking argues that Goffman, like Michel Foucault, eschews the concept of 'human nature' within his theoretical framework. But, again like Foucault, he is concerned with what it is to be a human character in the absence of 'human nature'. Both Goffman and Foucault address 'questions of how some of a person's possibilities grow into their very being, while others are excluded. This is the question of the dynamics of human nature' (Hacking, 2004: 288). 'The dynamics of human nature' is a phrase that suggests a 'human nature' that is produced through creativity and change, and indeed this is exactly how Hacking characterizes both Foucault's and Goffman's perspectives on 'human nature'. For Goffman, as already noted, we achieve character through becoming persons – that is, through our performance of a repertoire of parts. Performances occur within social milieux that determine what role can and cannot be taken, how it can be performed, and so on. This echoes Judith Butler's comment that we improvise within scenes of constraint (Butler, 2004a: 2). If character is the 'us-ness' of us – if it is the thing that (is considered to) make us what we are, then it is effectively our 'essence'.

Yet this 'character', for Goffman at least, is not something with which we are born. Remember, he argues that we achieve character

through becoming persons. So character is something we attain in our performance of parts – in our self-imitation. In the quotidian detail of life, in the large and (more usually) small choices that we make, we become who we are (see Hacking, 2004).

This is a perspective that cuts through an essentialism/constructionism binarism – a binarism that can become sterile. For Goffman, as Hacking suggests, human essence is not (as is now commonly assumed) in our genes, nor is it in some idea of a ‘soul’. Indeed, it is not innate in any way. Rather, it is dynamically and temporally *done*.<sup>1</sup> There is a continuity of character, but it is not innate or ‘natural’: it is achieved through series on series of performances. And these performances are fundamentally and intrinsically social. We are tied to the ‘character’ of such performances by a range of factors, of which social locations of various kinds are decisive. But it is in the improvisations that we exercise moral choice, and this choice is important in the creation and maintenance of an ethical subjectivity. Again, this ethical sense is not innate but is produced through layer upon layer of performance. Like identity itself, it becomes itself through the process of being done.

Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic properties but from moral rules that are impressed on him from without . . . The general capacity to be bound by moral rules may well belong to the individual, but the particular set of rules which transforms him [*sic*] into a human being derives from requirements established in the ritual organization of social encounters. (Goffman, 1967: 45)

## The interaction order

It is important to note the very social character of this interaction. Goffman is concerned with the details of everyday life, but it is far from the case that he is unconcerned with large-scale social rules. Indeed, for Goffman, the quotidian details of life are small-scale demonstrations of these ‘big’ social rules. It would be unwise to overstate the case, but it is clear that an emphasis on the sacred, ritualized nature of the social world characterizes at least some of his work. For Goffman (here very clearly following Emile Durkheim) interaction

<sup>1</sup> In this of course there are similarities, as Hacking (2004) notes, with the existentialist mantra ‘existence precedes essence’. There is not space here adequately to explore existentialism so I simply note this point.