

Mead and Goffman Comparison

Posted on July 27, 2022

Introduction

George Herbert Mead and Erving Goffman made major contributions to the sociological understanding of identity, interaction, and the self. The original comparison correctly recognized that both theorists reject the idea of a completely private identity formed independently of society. Mead explains how the capacity for selfhood develops through communication, role-taking, play, games, and the internalization of the generalized other. Goffman examines how already socialized people present themselves in encounters, manage impressions, cooperate in performances, and separate front-stage conduct from backstage preparation. Both belong to the broad tradition of symbolic interactionism, but they work at different analytical levels. Mead offers a developmental and philosophical account of how a self becomes possible, whereas Goffman provides a detailed sociology of how selves are displayed, protected, challenged, and negotiated in everyday situations.

Symbolic Interaction and the Social Self

Symbolic interactionism begins from the idea that people act toward objects, events, and other people according to meanings developed through interaction. Language allows individuals to interpret gestures, anticipate responses, and coordinate conduct. The self is therefore neither a biological object present in complete form at birth nor a fixed inner essence that society merely reveals. It develops and changes as the individual learns social meanings. Mead and Goffman share this foundation, although Goffman did not present himself as a systematic disciple of Mead. Their theories are complementary because Mead explains the emergence of reflective self-consciousness and Goffman explains its situational performance.

Mead: The Self Is Not Present at Birth

Mead argues that an infant has biological impulses and social potential but not a fully developed self. Selfhood requires the ability to take oneself as an object—to imagine how one appears from another position and respond to that imagined view. This capacity develops through meaningful communication. When children learn shared symbols, especially language, they can rehearse roles and understand that their conduct is interpreted by others. The self is social not because society simply controls the individual, but because reflective thought uses perspectives acquired in interaction.

The “I” and the “Me”

The original essay described the “I” as a person’s view of self and the “me” as the view seen through others’ eyes. Mead’s distinction is more specific. The “me” is the organized set of attitudes and expectations the individual has internalized from others. It represents the socialized aspect of the self. The “I” is the person’s response to those attitudes—the spontaneous, unpredictable, and creative moment of action. The “I” cannot be fully known before it acts; after the action, it becomes part of the remembered “me.” The self is thus a process of conversation between social expectations and individual response. This prevents Mead’s theory from reducing people to passive products of society.

The Preparatory and Play Stages

In early development, children imitate people around them without yet understanding organized roles. During the play stage, they take the role of significant others such as a parent, teacher, doctor, or fictional character. Playing one role at a time helps the child imagine a perspective different from their own. A child pretending to be a teacher speaks to an imagined student and begins to organize conduct according to the expectations attached to that role. Play therefore develops role-taking, but it does not yet require coordination of a whole system of positions.

The Game Stage

During the game stage, the child learns to consider several roles and rules simultaneously. In a team sport, a player must understand their own position, the likely actions of teammates and opponents, and the shared rules defining legitimate play. The ability to organize these perspectives supports a more complex self. The child can anticipate how a community will judge behavior rather than responding only to one parent or friend. The original essay correctly linked social influence to the game stage, but this stage is not simply a moment when society imposes identity. It is the development of coordinated perspective-taking.

The Generalized Other

Mead uses the “generalized other” to describe the organized attitudes of a wider group or community that an individual takes into account. When a person follows traffic rules, writes an academic paper, votes, or performs a professional duty, they respond to expectations broader than any one observer. Different groups may possess different generalized others, and people belong to several communities. This helps explain why identity contains multiple social commitments. It also allows criticism: the “I” can respond creatively to the “me” and contribute to changing collective expectations.

Mind as an Internalized Social Process

For Mead, mind develops through the internalization of communication. Thinking can be understood as an inner conversation in which a person rehearses possible actions and responses. Meaning is not located solely inside words or objects; it arises from social acts. A gesture becomes a significant symbol when it evokes in the speaker a response similar to the response it evokes in others. Language therefore enables self-reflection because individuals can hear and interpret their own words from a social perspective.

Goffman's Dramaturgical Perspective

Goffman compares social interaction to theatrical performance. People enter situations in which others form impressions and act on them. Individuals attempt to influence these impressions through appearance, language, setting, timing, and cooperation with others. The metaphor does not mean that every person is dishonest or that no identity is real. It means that social conduct is organized for audiences and depends on definitions of the situation. A teacher, patient, manager, friend, and customer each performs different role expectations, and those performances help make the encounter intelligible.

Front Stage

The front stage is the region in which a performance is presented to an audience. It includes the physical setting and the actor's personal front, such as clothing, manner, title, and speech. A physician in a consultation room, a server in a restaurant, or an employee in a meeting follows conventions that communicate competence and role. Front-stage behavior usually suppresses actions that would contradict the desired definition of the situation. This does not make it false. Professional performances can express genuine commitment while still being regulated.

Back Stage

The backstage is a region where performers can prepare, relax aspects of the front, discuss the audience, correct mistakes, and coordinate future conduct. Restaurant staff may speak differently in the kitchen than in the dining room; teachers may discuss classroom problems in a staff area; a person may rehearse before an interview. The original essay correctly described backstage preparation as influenced by social expectations. Backstage conduct remains social, however, and often has its own audience, rules, and performance. There may be no final private region entirely free from presentation.

Impression Management

Impression management refers to efforts to guide how others define a person and situation. People select information, repair embarrassment, maintain appropriate appearance, and interpret audience reactions. Some management is strategic deception, but much of it is ordinary cooperation. A grieving person may control emotion during a formal duty, or a nervous speaker may present confidence so the event can proceed. Audiences also protect performances by overlooking small errors. Social order depends on this mutual tact. Goffman's analysis therefore concerns teams and interaction rituals, not only individual manipulation.

Performance Teams

Many performances are produced collectively. Coworkers, family members, medical teams, and service staff cooperate to sustain a definition of events. Team members may possess information that would undermine the performance if revealed carelessly. They coordinate language, divide roles, and correct one another. Power affects who can define the situation and whose mistakes receive protection. Goffman's team concept expands the self beyond an isolated actor because identity is often supported by others.

Face and Interaction Ritual

"Face" refers to the positive social value a person claims through the line they take in an encounter. When someone makes an error, is contradicted, or is publicly exposed, face may be threatened. Participants use avoidance, apology, humor, and correction to restore interaction. Face-work shows that identity is fragile and relational. People often preserve another's dignity not because they agree but because the encounter would otherwise collapse. Mead explains the capacity to anticipate another's perspective; Goffman shows how that capacity is used to maintain situational order.

Goffman's View of the Self

The original essay said that Goffman believes no one has a single true self. Goffman is cautious about treating the self as a hidden substance behind performance. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the performed character is an image generated through the scene, while the performer is the person engaged in producing it. His phrase "dramatic effect" suggests that a self appears as the successful outcome of interaction. This does not prove that people have no continuity or sincere commitments. It shifts sociological attention from searching for an authentic interior to examining the conditions under which identities become credible. (Goffman, 1959)

Similarity: Society Is Constitutive

Both theorists regard society as constitutive of the self rather than an external force acting on an already complete individual. Mead's child acquires selfhood through role-taking and shared symbols. Goffman's adult identity becomes socially real through performances recognized by audiences. In both theories, "who I am" depends partly on perspectives, categories, and expectations available in interaction. Neither says that a person is only whatever others think. Mead preserves spontaneity through the "I," and Goffman shows that performers exercise skill in selecting and organizing presentations.

Similarity: The Self Is Multiple and Situational

Mead recognizes that different social relationships generate different "me" perspectives, while Goffman analyzes different roles and performances. A person may be a parent, employee, friend, citizen, patient, and student without one role being wholly false. The roles can conflict, and identity requires coordination. Both theories therefore challenge the idea that consistency means behaving identically everywhere. Social competence often requires situational variation while preserving broader commitments.

Difference: Development Versus Encounter

The clearest difference concerns the question each theorist asks. Mead asks how mind and self emerge developmentally and philosophically. His concepts explain the child's acquisition of perspective-taking and the relationship between individual action and social order. Goffman generally begins after these capacities exist and examines face-to-face encounters. His unit is the situation: the meeting, service exchange, ceremony, institution, or interaction ritual. Mead provides a theory of genesis; Goffman provides a micro-sociology of presentation. (Goffman, 1961)

Difference: Spontaneity and Performance

Mead explicitly theorizes spontaneity through the "I," which responds to organized social attitudes and can introduce novelty. Goffman focuses more on constraints, information control, and performance requirements. Unexpected conduct appears in his work as disruption, embarrassment, or a challenge to the definition of the situation. This does not mean Goffman denies creativity; it means his analysis asks how novelty is managed socially. Mead places the creative response within the structure of the self, while Goffman observes its interactional consequences.

Difference: Social Order

Mead explains social order through internalized roles and the generalized other. Individuals coordinate because they can take shared perspectives. Goffman explains order through rituals, tact, performances, audience cooperation, and the repair of disruptions. His order is more fragile. A small mistake can expose the work required to sustain normality. Together, the theories show that society persists through both deep socialization and moment-to-moment maintenance.

Power, Institutions, and Criticism

Both theorists are sometimes criticized for insufficient attention to large-scale power. Mead's generalized other may appear too unified when societies contain inequality and conflicting norms. Goffman's performance metaphor may describe how people adapt without explaining who created the roles. Yet Goffman's studies of stigma and total institutions reveal how classifications and institutional control shape identity, while Mead's framework allows marginalized groups to challenge an existing generalized other. Contemporary sociology can connect their micro-level insights with race, class, gender, disability, bureaucracy, and media.

Identity in Digital Interaction

Social media makes the comparison especially relevant. Users anticipate audiences, select images, edit messages, and manage multiple profiles in a Goffman-like performance. They also internalize feedback, group norms, and imagined public reactions in ways consistent with Mead. The boundary between front and back becomes unstable because private content can be recorded and redistributed. Metrics such as likes provide a visible form of social evaluation. Digital identity is not entirely artificial; it is another environment where the self develops and is performed.

Conclusion

Mead and Goffman both show that identity arises through social interaction. Mead explains how children develop a self by using significant symbols, taking roles, moving from play to organized games, and internalizing the generalized other. His "I" and "me" describe the continuing relationship between spontaneous response and social expectation. Goffman examines how people present selves to audiences through front-stage performances, backstage preparation, impression management, teamwork, and face-work. Their theories differ because Mead explains the emergence of self-consciousness while Goffman explains the organization of encounters. Used together, they provide a powerful account: society enters the person through perspective-taking, and the person continually reproduces or revises identity through performance. (Goffman, 1963)

References

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Anchor Books.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.

Mead, G. H. (2015). *Mind, self, and society: The definitive edition* (C. W. Morris, D. R. Huebner, & H. Joas, Eds.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1934)

Stryker, S. (2008). From Mead to a structural symbolic interactionism and beyond. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 34, 15-31.