Academic Journal of Creative Art Therapies

A book review: The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

Goffman, E. (2003). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing.

Reviewed by: Dov Blum-Yazdi - Drama Therapist and Clinical Criminologist. Graduate of psychotherapy mind-body-spirit program. Doctoral student in psychoanalysis and Hermeneutic: Bar-Ilan Uni. Works in "Place to be" a drama and arts therapy studio. Supervision and teaching in Arts Therapist training programs: Haifa Uni. and the Academic College of Arts and society. Researcher of "Leelah - unintentional play model" and "The play paradigm": Theoretical Concepts of Power, Identity and Liberty in the Therapeutic Playing Field. A peace activist.

The 'playing self' in sociology

The fundamental question of self- identity seeks to define and understand who I am and what I am. The philosophical endeavor is to formulate what is essential to man and what are the values which are meaningful to human existence. There are many philosophical approaches to this subject, from Socrates to the present day: these approaches offer distinctions between existence and essence; and between action and the contemplation of different self-perceptions. Each, in its way, reveals the existence and formation of the Self. In this review article I refer to the book by the sociologist Erving Goffman, "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", which presents the Self as 'a playing entity' or as a playing essence, and inquires as to the meaning of its insights in terms of the field of drama therapy. While this book is not new, it is still significant and relevant to drama therapy today.

The stage model

In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (2003) presents the results of a sociological study which uses the dramaturgical perspective to explore social life. His stage model assumes that life presents us with things that are real, and which may not have been well rehearsed before their exposure before us: "it is possible that the appearance of he who performs in public will suffer

from a lack of appropriate dramaturgical intention" (ibid, pg. 53). In real life, the part played by the individual is suited in size to the parts played by the rest of those present; "the rest of those present" refers to the audience. Therefore, a theatrical performance is nothing but a sham, as opposed to the performance of everyday life.

The principles of the model

According to Goffman, the individual must act in such a way that he is able to express himself, while

others must, in some way, form an impression of him. The eloquence of the individual and his ability to create an impression on others include two types of essentially dissimilar signaling operations: **(a) the impression which the individual knowingly creates:** formed by the verbal cues or substitutes which the individual uses in order to create the impression that he, and others, tend associate with these symbols. This is communication in the primary and conventional sense. **(b) The impression created by his appearance:** which we tend to consider "an unconscious effect" (ibid, pg. 67): includes a wide range of action, which others consider to be necessary for the process, and since it is an unconscious impression, the act is perceived as real, honest and sincere, and of an essential nature. In practice, the information conveyed by the individual to others using these two types of communication is contingent. In both cases, it is not the essential nature of the individual's own Self, rather a pretense or embodiment of a role: "neither of these extremes is necessary..." (ibid, pg. 68).

Of the two types of communication - the impression that man creates and the impression of him created, Dan Goffman addresses mainly the latter, which is "the more theatrical and context-dependent kind" (ibid, pg. 15). If we accept the premise that an individual creates a definition of the situation in his appearance before others, we must realize that those others, passive as their role may be, will themselves create their own personal definition of the situation, as a result of the reactions to the presence of the aforementioned individual as well as all of the modes of action initiated in his presence: "even on the stage no 'hero' appears alone. He is surrounded by a group of persons who give vitality and meaning to his actions and words" (ibid, pg. 187). Therefore, such is Goffman's definition of *consensus for work purposes*: all of the participants

together contribute to the all-embracing definition of the situation, and this definition does not necessarily reflect true agreement as to what in fact exists; rather, true agreement as to the question of whose demands, or what questions, must be temporarily honored or addressed. In addition, a real consensus regarding the issue will prevail among the participants, since avoidance of open conflict regarding the definition of the situation is preferred.

According to Goffman, given that the individual purposefully plans the definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others, we can assume that incidents may occur during the interaction; and these incidents may contradict, cast a doubt on, or negate the definition of the situation in question. When such "*disruptions in execution*" (ibid, pg. 177) occur, the interaction itself may be suspended in a confusing and embarrassing manner. Some of the assumptions upon which the reactions of the participants were based lose their validity, and the participants feel themselves immersed in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and in which it is no longer clear. At such moments, that individual whose self-representation has been disrupted may feel shame, while the others may feel hostility towards him; all the participants feel uncomfortable in such a situation: they stand bemused, helpless and at a loss. They experience the anomaly which occurs with the collapse of the tiny social system expressed in a face to face interaction.

Goffman explains that the fact that the initial definition of the situation, created by the individual, may be used as a basis for the resulting cooperation: while emphasizing the point of view of the action, we must not overlook the crucial fact that every definition of a situation created in this way also has a moral character. For Goffman, the moral character of this plan represents a major theme for discussion, as he claims

that human society is based on the principle according to which every person who has certain social characteristics, has the moral right to expect that "others will appreciate his worth and relate to him in an appropriate manner" (ibid, pg. 22).

The importance of disruptions in the definition of the situation must not be evaluated according to the frequency with which they occur, as it is clear that such disruptions would occur more often if not for the continuous implementation of preventive measures. Goffman argues that precautions are consistently taken in order to avoid such embarrassing situations and to make up for events whose disruption was not prevented. According to Goffman, the strategies and tactics used by the individual to protect the definition of a situation created by himself are called "protective measures" (ibid, pg. 180). When used by the individual participating in an interaction to protect his definition of the situation and prevent the disruption of his presentation of Self, these measures may also be called "tact" (ibid, pg. 197). Goffman points out that most impressions can coexist because the recipients of the impression also employ protective measures, or tact, while receiving it.

In addition to the fact that precautions are taken to avoid any disruption of the planned definitions of the situation, Goffman notes that "there is great interest in these disruptions, and it [this interest] plays a significant role in the social life of the group" (ibid, pg. 23). In groups, it is customary to play and make reciprocal social "pranks", into which embarrassment is intentionally integrated, which are not intended to be taken seriously. Intricate fantasies which involve catastrophic shame are woven. Anecdotes from the past - real, modified or fictional, described in detail, are told and retold; disruptions which occurred and which were thwarted, disruptions which were avoided or which

almost happened, or disruptions which occurred and which were resolved in an admirable manner. It seems that no group exists which does not have a ready stock of plays, amusements and books of tales which teach a lesson; all of which are used as a source of jokes, a means for the group to relieve anxiety, and as advice instructing the group to moderate their demands and limit their expectations.

In summary, when an individual appears before the other, he will have many motives to control their impression of the situation. Goffman's interest lies in the presentation of common techniques which prompt people to preserve this kind of impression, as well as the results; i.e. the identity formed due to the use of these techniques. This special program of activities carried out by the individual participating in the interaction, or the role fulfilled by the individual within the combined activities of a live, active social system is not a topic for discussion by Goffman, since he views them to be a posteriori. The purpose of Goffman's essay is to discuss the dramaturgical processes of the participant; his dramaturgical problems inherent in his presentation of Self and his actions before others, which help or prevent him from creating a coherent "I". The focus of the discussion is on stage arts and on stage management, which are integrated into everyday life in society everywhere, and which provide Goffman with a clearly defined dimension for structured and systematic sociological analysis: "therefore, we may not have to analyze performance based on quantitative criteria... it is better that they be analyzed by artistic analysis" (ibid, pg. 52).

Critique

To understand the effects of Goffman's teachings on the field of drama therapy, I will address three leading questions: (1) What is the role of biology in the identity of the Playing Man? (2) What will allow the playing

subject consistency / what will stabilize his being? (3) What is the purpose of the individual who is playing?

1. **Biologism.** Goffman's book suggests that any attempt to base psychoanalysis on a biological model, and any attempt at the direct application of biological concepts to a therapeutic field, will inevitably be misleading and eliminate the essential distinction between biology and culture. This is because mental representations are not necessarily created in parallel to the physical development of the child; and there are no psychological characteristics which inevitably occur in accordance with the growth of the body or in accordance with the anatomy of the body. Such explanations of human behavior, made by biologists, ignore the precedence of the construction of symbols in the definition of self of the Playing Man (Blum-Yazdi, 2014b).

The question to be examined is whether we perform biological reductionism, of mental effects, when we assume that concepts borrowed from biology have a structured mental representation? For example, is the concept of a phallus a tangible part of the body which has an actual mental representation, or is it a symbol with a symbolic representation? The cultural perspective, too, which completely ignores the relevance of biology, may miss important indicators. If the meaning of "biologism" is understood correctly, i.e., if it is understood to be ancillary, not a reduction of mental effects to raw biological determinism, in such a way that the power of the images enables them to act as mechanisms for release, then it is possible to support the biological viewpoint as well.

The social order is the main playing field in which the Playing Man wishes to adopt an identity. This identity can never be fully achieved. The social construct is not a field for the creation of a real, authentic identity; rather, the reason for which the subject decides to create an identity. This identity undergoes constant transformation. Therefore, I propose that the focus of drama therapy should be to allow the player to recognize the ever-changing truth about himself. Man can recognize his own truth only when it is expressed in play. Only after he has been played in the presence of the other does the player, whoever he may be, win full recognition. It is via the act of play that the player brings his 'self' into existence. As claimed by Lacan (Lacan & Miller, 1988), truth is not something waiting to be revealed, and it is not something which represents a unique essence. The moment of revelation of truth regarding the Playing Man is the moment in which it is created; its discovery and its creation are the same, as they emerge simultaneously.

2. **Cohesion.** Many theorists have examined the fear of breakdown (Winnicott, 2010, 1999), the fear of the collapse of the Self (Kohut, 2005), the difficulty of creating a continuous and uniform identity when play has no real value (Erikson, 1961), and the fear that the show will not last (Goffman, 2003). The study by Huizinga (2009, 1984) explains how a cohesive 'playing Self' was formed in the medieval period. According to Huizinga, during this period the theatrical play of life itself was, among other things, a tool via which lifestyle patterns were consciously redesigned. The Passion of the courtiers for secession, that gave rise the need to provide a formal pattern of world experience, "copied the real life to the drama era" (2009, p 105). Meanwhile, life became a public spectacle courtyards, live drama, theatricality ceremonial and stiff which exists in all social ritual. Such play patterns, delivered in a historic manner and embodied by symbols, provide an interpretation of life and of the world. This is the true value of a social ideal, which establishes a symbolic system that serves as a

mechanism for the construction of meaning, as a formula for the formalization, defamiliarization and exclusion of a chaotic and confusing reality. This system maps the world of experience, explains political history and regulates the processes on two levels: the social level, generated by rituals and order; and the psychological level, produced by the playing figure, the coherent Self. What began as role playing in the field of social patterns was internalized as a value in a collection of common images and symbols used by cultural agents in the process of socialization and in the process of construction of the identity of Playing Man (Blum-Yazdi, 2014a).

According to Goffman, the cohesion of Self of Western Man is usually fed by illusion, such as the cohesion self which is created based on biology, Our goal is to support the illusion and confirm it. Lacan (2005), also refers to the illusion of cohesion self. According to him, the only full and coherent exist, integrates in the symbolic order. Whereby the illusion of the body provides the subject with stability and a construct of reality. Illusions create a feeling that we know who we are, what our objects are, and what the purpose of life is; therefore, during drama therapy process, the illusion should not be interpreted. The illusion shapes the identity of the individual at play and the task of the subject is to examine his position in it. The success of treatment in drama therapy, the creation of a coherent Self, may lie in the fact that the subject recognizes the illusion inherent in what is 'real'. This recognition will allow the subject to deal with his symptoms and alter his fate.

3. **Aim.** According to Goffman (2003), the daily life of the Self is contingent on another, who observes him; similar to the theater, as a specific example of human play, since the medium of theater is built primarily on the relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

The interdependence between the viewer and the viewed affects more than the quality of the theatrical experience. The viewing by an external observer, a fellow-man, another; or by the inner Self, the changing self, turns the behavior of the individual into a show - not in the sense of a sham or pretense, but in the deepest sense of the word: an activity directed at the other, and an awareness of him as an integral part of the reconstitution of the Self. As claimed by Lacan (1977): "man's desire is the desire of / to the other" (pg. 235).

Therefore, my conclusion is that the subject emerges while being an other; that is, the subject comes into being from the perspective of the other. Because of this, the Playing Self of the individual is essentially an object that someone else has aroused to. What creates the motivation / the attraction for the other is not some internal trait of the thing itself, but the very existence of the otherness. This fact tends to reduce the special importance of the particular other, but at the same time, it makes the existence of countless others visible. The playing Self is the playing Self of / to the other. The playing Self emerges to / for the other, and is therefore, essentially, the playing Self of the other. Its significance is also found in that it is the object of the playing Self of the other, who receives recognition by another, additional person. The signifiers, says Derrida (1978), always only signifies other signifiers, and not the essence beyond the words.

Thus, the playing Self is in constant motion from one 'other' to the next, the first 'other' always indicating the second 'other', and so on. Therefore, drama therapy is inevitably characterized by a never-ending process, as the playing Self is always playing for someone else. If the identity of Playing Man is the identity of the other, born in the field of the other, then the field in which this identity was born is a field without a master: there is no Playing Other for the Playing Man, which is

similar to the declaration of the emptiness of the Holy Sepulcher (Blum-Yazdi, 2013).

In summary, the Playing Man originates in the other. Therefore, the most important point brought up by this discussion is that the individual at play is a product of society. The individual at play is not a private matter, as it appeared to be at first glance, rather, is always found in a dialectical relationship with the perceived desires of the other Play Subjects. The result of the investigation of this issue, and of the question of the extent to which the one at play in drama therapy may surpass himself and make a radical choice to be something else, may be the building of a model or structure that takes into account that the Playing Man has qualities of both consolidation and change.

References

Blum-Yazdi, D. (2013). Language, Kwan, World. *Journal of east-west Psychology. Quart*. No. 3, 9.3, Bar-Ilan University.

Blum-Yazdi, D. (2014a). Leelah - a play in itself: a non intervention model of drama therapy. In Berger, R. (editor), *Creation - The therapy heart* (p. 67-95). Kriyat Bialik: ahch.

Blum-Yazdi, D. (2014b). Power games: Huizinga vs. Klein - approaches to play. *Journal of Creative Arts Therapies (AJCAT)*. Volume 4, Issue 2, pp. 457-474, University of Haifa.

Derrida, J. (1978). *Writing and Difference*. Tras. Alan Bass. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Erikson, E. H. (1937). Configurations in play: Clinical notes. *Psychoanal. Quart.* 6:139-206.

Goffman, E. (2003). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing.

Huizinga, J. (1984). *Playing Man*. Jerusalem: Bialik.

Huizinga, J. (2009). *Fall middle Ages*. (Translation: Carla Perlstein). Jerusalem: Carmel.

Kohut, H. (2005). *How Does Analysis Cure*? Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

Lacan, J. (1977). *The seminar, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, .London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho Analysis.

Lacan, J. (2005). *20th Seminary (1973-1972) More*. Tel Aviv:Resling.

Lacan, J., & Miller, J. A. (1988). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. CUP Archive.

Winnicott, D., W. (1999). *Playing and Reality*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

Winnicott, D., W. (2010). *True self, false self*. Tel Aviv: Am Oved.

Dov Blum-Yazdi dovblum@gmail.com