

Erving Goffman — the Fragility of the Social Self

Erving Goffman's theorization of the self emerges most explicitly in:

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956/1959)

Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior (1967)

Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (1963)

Below is a conceptually dense, academically appropriate summary with exact references.

1. The Performed Self (Goffman 1959)

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that the self is “a performed character” (Goffman, 1959, p. 244).

This means the self has no ontological depth; it is constructed through interaction and stabilized only through successful impression management.

Individuals act on a “front stage” where they curate signs of competence, legitimacy, and moral worth.

Social order depends on the mutual, tacit agreement to maintain these performances.

Key reference:

Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books.

2. Face and the Ritual Order (Goffman 1967)

In *Interaction Ritual*, Goffman defines face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself” (Goffman, 1967, p. 5).

Face is inherently precarious, because it depends entirely on the recognition of others.

When one's face is threatened or discredited, the emotional response of shame arises as an indicator that the social self has collapsed.

This is why Goffman states that everyday interaction requires constant “face-work,” the strategic repair and protection of one's social value (Goffman, 1967, p. 12–16).

Key reference:

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-Face Behavior*. Pantheon Books.

3. Shame and the Spoiled Identity (Goffman 1963)

In *Stigma*, Goffman connects shame directly to the experience of identity discreditation.

A “spoiled identity” emerges when a person cannot sustain the identity claims they present to others.

“Shame becomes a central possibility” (Goffman, 1963, p. 2) whenever the self risks exposure as inadequate, deviant, or incompetent.

Thus, shame is not primarily psychological — it is a structural feature of interaction arising whenever the fragile, socially dependent self fails to maintain its expected performance.

Key reference:

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Prentice-Hall.

Michel Foucault — Shame, Discipline, and Surveillance (with precise references)

Foucault does not treat “shame” as a stand-alone concept, but it emerges indirectly in his analyses of disciplinary power, normalization, and surveillance, especially in:

Discipline and Punish (1975/1977)

The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1 (1976/1978)

Below is a more theoretically dense account with textual references.

1. The Internalization of the Gaze (Foucault 1977)

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault’s reading of the Panopticon demonstrates how subjects come to internalize the gaze of authority.

This produces what he calls “a state of conscious and permanent visibility” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201).

Although Foucault does not use the term “shame,” the affective mechanism that sustains this visibility is precisely the fear of being seen as inadequate, abnormal, or deviant.

Thus, shame can be read as a by-product of panoptic visibility, a mechanism that ensures compliance without coercion.

Reference:

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Vintage Books.

2. Normalization and the Production of Docile Bodies

Foucault argues that disciplinary institutions (schools, barracks, hospitals) operate through normative judgments that rank, compare, and evaluate individuals.

The subject learns to measure itself against statistical norms — becoming what Foucault calls a “docile body” (Foucault, 1977, p. 136).

This mechanism instills the constant possibility of falling short, producing the affective climate in which shame flourishes.

3. Confession, Visibility, and the Affective Economy of Power (Foucault 1978)

In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, Foucault argues that modern subjects are compelled to confess their desires, emotions, and failures.

The imperative to disclose the self — to be transparent, legible, normal — generates new opportunities for shame and self-judgment.

Foucault writes that the modern subject “becomes the object of information, never a subject in communication” (Foucault, 1978, p. 66).

Shame emerges when one fails to conform to these normative expectations of transparency and self-discipline.

Reference:

Foucault, M. (1978). The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction. Pantheon Books.