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Four Social Situations:

A Class Activity to Teach Goffman's Impression Management Through Inductive Learning
Created by: Maria D. Duenas

Learning Goal: At the end of this activity, students will be able to identify Goffman's impression management based on common scenarios they would encounter in their everyday lives.

Goal assessment: Students will demonstrate their initial knowledge and comprehension through a class discussion.

Abstract: The purpose of this activity is to help students inductively learn Goffman's concept of impression management through examining how they behave in four social situations: professional settings, with friends, on social media, and important but personal settings. To complete this activity, students will examine their own behavior in each of these settings, such as their word choice, style of dress, posture, and conversational topics. Through a class discussion, students will learn Goffman's impression management – that we adapt our behavior in different social situations in order to impress the people that we are speaking to.

This course activity takes approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The activity could be shortened by having students examine their behavior in only two social situations.

I did this activity with a classroom of 25 students before they learned about Goffman's presentation of self in everyday life. However, this activity can also be completed after students have learned the concept.

For this activity, I divided the two whiteboards in the classroom in half so that I had a total of 4 boards. Then, I listed the following four social situations and examples on each board.

- 1. Professional Settings**

Examples: Job interview, in the classroom, or at work

- 2. With Friends**

Examples: Party, hanging out at a friend's house, or playing video games

- 3. Social Media**

Examples: Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, or Tumblr

- 4. Important but Personal Settings**

Example: Meeting your significant other's family for the first time

I placed at least one dry erase marker at each board. I came in 10 minutes earlier than usual to set up the boards. I presented the following instructions to students on a PowerPoint slide:

“There are four social situations listed on the white boards around the classroom. On each board, write examples of how you behave and interact with others in each situation.

- What words do you use?
- What words do you make sure that you do NOT use?
- How do you dress?
- What does your hair/makeup look like?
- What is your posture?
- What non-verbal gestures do you do?
- What topics do you discuss?
- What topics do you avoid?

Please work in groups of 3-4 to complete this activity.”

I gave students about 10-15 minutes to work as a group on these questions and visit each board. To help you anticipate what might happen in the classroom, below are some examples of what my students wrote in two of the four social situations:

Table 1: A Sample of Student-Generated Responses to Two of the Four Social Situations

Social Situation	Some Student-Generated Examples for Each Situation
Professional Settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What words do you use? Formal language • What words do you make sure that you do NOT use? No cursing and no slang • How do you dress? Suit, no shorts, no clothes with rips or holes • What does your hair/makeup look like? No cakey makeup; “The no makeup makeup” • What is your posture? Sitting up straight and no slouching • What non-verbal gestures do you do? Hands folded on lap. No nervous fidgeting • What topics do you discuss? Your work experience. Why you are interested in the job • What topics do you avoid? Politics. Gossip
With Friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What words do you use? Slang is okay • What words do you make sure that you do NOT use? Too formal language • How do you dress? You can dress formally or casually with friends depending on where you are going • What does your hair/makeup look like? You can go all out with makeup with your friends and it wouldn’t be considered unprofessional or too much; You can also not wear any makeup and that would be okay

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your posture? Slouching is okay; Proper posture is fine if that is how you normally carry yourself (no fakeness) • What non-verbal gestures do you do? You can do more “street” gestures that wouldn’t be professional to do at work, like the peace sign to say goodbye or “homie handshakes” • What topics do you discuss? Any topic is fine from personal life to work life • What topics do you avoid? No need to avoid any topics
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Once everyone had written their responses on each board, I reviewed some of their responses as a class. I allotted 10 minutes for this task. After reading a few of the responses out loud, I asked them, “why would you behave that way?” As they explained their reasoning, I restated their points. I then moved on to the next board, read a few of their responses, and asked them to explain their reasoning again. I found that students reached the main points of this activity on their own and I simply needed to state the points as they emerged from the conversation. The following are the key takeaways that you could emphasize during the class discussion, but feel free to expand on these ideas. I provide a few examples of how I connected their answers to Goffman’s impression management.

Key Takeaways for the Class Discussion:

- ❖ **Key takeaway 1:** We act differently depending on who we are interacting with and what the situation is. Our behavior changes to make a good impression on the person we are interacting with in a situation.
 - **How I connected this key point to what the students wrote on the white boards:** Throughout our class discussion, I asked them to explain why they behaved a certain way in one of the situations, but not in another. For example, you might discuss the students’ behavior during a job interview compared to hanging out with friends. For example, I asked them, “Why did you wear a suit to a job interview, but not when you were hanging out with your friends?” Several students responded that they needed to impress the interviewer in order to get a job, but they didn’t need to impress their friends because they were already friends with them. Therefore, they wore everyday clothes, not suits, when they hung out with their friends. With this example, I emphasized that there are different expectations for how to make a good impression with the people you are interacting with.
- ❖ **Key takeaway 2:** The self is fluid and situational.
 - **How I connected this key point to what the students wrote on the white boards:** I asked the students in what situation would they feel the most comfortable in. They responded “with friends” consistently. Then I asked if which situation would they would be the most uncomfortable and they stated in professional situations or important but personal settings. I asked if they felt like they were fake in any of these situations. A few responded that they are fake sometimes and specified that they feel the most fake during a job interview. Other

students responded that they weren't being fake in any of these situations; they were just presenting different parts of themselves. After this comment, I made the connection to Goffman by stating that Goffman would agree with you because he argued that the self is fluid and situational

- ❖ **Key takeaway 3:** Introduce Erving Goffman's concept of impression management
 - **How I connected this key point to what the students wrote on the white boards:** After I finished reviewing each board, I then transitioned to the concept of impression management by stating that a sociologist named Erving Goffman came up with a concept to represent this social phenomenon represented on the white boards. I then provided a brief definition of Goffman's concept of impression management. I stated that impression management is the idea that we try to control the impression that other people have of us. Then, I stated that we will review the concept in detail next week. Please see attached PowerPoint for what we reviewed in class after completing this activity

The class completed this activity at the end of the class session, so that the class concluded when we finished this activity.

Potential Pitfalls and Some Ideas on How to Avoid Them:

- ❖ To avoid too many students at the white board, I asked the students to work on their answers first in groups. When they finish developing their answers for each scenario, they can go to the white board to write their answers as a group or send a representative or pair of representatives from their group to the board
- ❖ Some students are very enthusiastic about the opportunity to write on the whiteboard while others are very reluctant to do so. I approached the students who seemed to have finished their answers but were not going to the board and let them know that they can wait until other students are at the white board before going up. With other students at the board, there will be less attention on them specifically. This strategy was successful in getting the hesitant students to come up to the board
- ❖ To avoid student complaints that other groups took their answers, I asked the students to put a star next to an answer that was already on the board but their group also thought of. This strategy was useful in that it helped the class see what was particularly important ways of behaving in each situation, which allowed us to focus the class discussion on the most common answers. For example, students agreed that it was important to wear professional clothes at an interview
- ❖ If you do not have access to two whiteboards in your classroom, then a potential alternative is to use Post-It Super Sticky Easel Pads. These are portable adhesive sticky pads that you can stick on the walls of your classroom. They can be easily removed and do not leave any residue on the walls

Goffman's impression management is part of the unit on the symbolic interactionist tradition in my Introduction to Sociology course. This activity is useful in helping students be successful in this unit of the course by getting them to think about how their own behavior is shaped by social interactions. Students reported that this activity helped them connect with the idea that the self is fluid and socially constructed.

If you are using this TRAILS resource, please include a clear and legible citation.

GOFFMAN'S IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

GOFFMAN

- Erving Goffman developed some of the most influential concepts in sociology
- One of those concepts was **impression management**

IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

- **Impression management** is the idea that we try to control the impression that other people have of us
- We control our image through our attire, word choice, hair/makeup, posture, non-verbal gestures, discussion topics, etc.

THE SELF

- The self is created and then adapted through social interaction
- We can see this process unfold in our everyday interactions
- We act differently depending on who we are interacting with and what the situation is

THE SELF

- Our behavior changes to make a good impression on the person we are interacting with in a given situation
- The self is fluid and situational
- For example, we behave differently with friends than we do with colleagues at work

DRAMATURGY

- Erving Goffman argued that social interaction is similar to the theater
- He called this concept **dramaturgy**, where individuals act out roles for an audience
- In the performance of the self, there is the front stage and the back stage

DRAMATURGY

- **Front stage** is where we present our best selves to maintain a good impression with who we are interacting
- **Back stage** is where you do not need to maintain your performance or manage impressions

DISCUSSION QUESTION

- Provide three real-life examples of social situations that involve movement between front stage and back stage