

# Offprint 7

## Extracts from *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

Erving Goffman

The individual's initial projection commits him to what he is proposing to be and requires him to drop all pretences of being other things. As the interaction among the participants progresses, additions and modifications ... occur, but it is essential that these later developments be related without contradiction to ... the initial positions taken by the several participants. It would seem that an individual can more easily make a choice as to what line of treatment to demand from and extend to the others present at the beginning of an encounter than he can alter the line of treatment that is being pursued once the interaction is under way. (p. 22)

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual ... Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another, so that open contradiction will not occur ... each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give lip service. Further, there is usually a kind of division of definitional labour. Each participant is allowed to establish the tentative official rule regarding matters which are vital to him but not immediately important to others ... In exchange for this courtesy he remains silent or non-committal on matters important to others but not immediately important to him. We have then a kind of interactional *modus vivendi* [way of going on]. Together the participants contribute to a single over-all definition of the situation which involves ... agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured ... [and] the desirability of avoiding an open conflict of definitions of the situation. I will refer to this level of agreement as a 'working consensus'. (pp. 20–21)

From: Goffman, E. (1975) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Penguin, Harmondsworth.