



# Performance and Persona: Goffman and Jung's approaches to professional identity applied to public relations



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## ABSTRACT

Public relations work involves shaping, reflecting and communicating identity for organisations and individuals, and is in turn shaped by the professional identity both of the field and individual public relations practitioners. This paper explores these issues from the dual perspectives of sociologist Erving Goffman's (1922–1982) reflections on the performance of work and Carl Jung's (1875–1961) concept of Persona, the socially acceptable face of the individual or group. The former explores these issues through observation of external behaviours, the latter by engaging with the psyche. Goffman and Jung, despite their conflicting worldviews, offer a complementary understanding of the operation, internal and external, of professional identity.

The paper, which is conceptual and interpretive, with the objective of building theory, summarises contemporary approaches to professional identity in public relations and other fields, before introducing Goffman, who is often mentioned in this context, and Jung, who is not. Together these two scholars offer insights into the interior and exterior aspects of identity, which is here applied to public relations, raising questions both about the production of identity as a commodity for others and the production of self-image of public relations practitioners. The introduction of Jungian thinking brings the inward or experiential dimension of professional identity to this debate.

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations is engaged with issues of identity as (a) a commodity created for clients and employers; (b) its own 'contested terrain' as a field; and (c) the professional identity of practitioners. The first of these is central to practice, given "the public relations activity of large organisations today ... is identity-related in that each organisation must work to establish its unique 'self' while connecting its concerns to those of the 'cultural crowd'" (Cheney & Christensen, 2001a, p. 234). Others have engaged with the production of organisational symbols and discursive identity (Grunig, 1993; Mickey, 2003; Roper, 2005) and the creation of identities for individuals (Motion, 1999). The identity of the field (b) has been explored as a jurisdictional issue (Hutton, 1999, 2001, 2010), a 'contested terrain' (Cheney & Christensen, 2001b), and more recently as an argument for a public relations identity as a social practice in a complex society, centrally involved in concepts such as trust and legitimacy and issues of power and language, to be investigated from a constructivist perspective (Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2012). This continues and develops discussions about the paradigms that shape its research and self-understanding (Curtin, 2012; Edwards, 2012; Pieczka, 1996). There has been debate around the *content* of identity for public

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relations practitioners: for example whether practitioners see themselves as ethical guardians or advocates (Baker, 2008; Bowen, 2008). Literature concerning roles (White & Dozier, 1992; Zerfass, Vercic, Tench, Verhoeven, & Moreno, 2013) could also be grouped under the heading of identity and others have explored how practitioners identify or distance themselves from public relations as a profession (Jeffrey & Brunton, 2012). Less scrutinised is the means by which professional identity in public relations practitioners, both collectively and individually, is produced. One exception is Edwards' (2010) use of Bourdieu to articulate how PR identity is gendered and racially defined; another is Curtin and Gaither (2005, 2007) use of the circuit of culture (see below) to examine public relations identity as one element in a dynamic set of fluctuating relationships. This paper considers literature regarding the production and maintenance of professional identity, then examines two, apparently incompatible, approaches to such work, before returning to public relations theory and practice in the concluding remarks.

## 2. Professional identity

Professional practice can be seen as the notion of practising a profession, as in medicine or law; the idea of practising professionalism, that is enacting aspects of identity associated with being or been seen as a professional; there is also the moral–ethical quality, the sense of ethical responsibility in one's practice; and opposition to 'amateur', implying some reward for services (Green, 2009a, pp. 6–7). This paper is primarily concerned with the second of these, enacting a professional identity. Like others (Edwards, 2006; Roper, 2005), Green deploys Bourdieu's sociology (Bourdieu & Nice, 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), which includes analysis of the social function of professions and offers "a sustained and particularly creative engagement with the problematics and aporias that are involved in trying to understand practice" (Green, 2009b, p. 44). Actors are seen to compete for positions of power within a field. Bourdieu's concept of 'fields' is organised around behaviour and identity, and is particularly relevant to this discussion:

... identity and professional development entail habituation to a discursive and symbolic field, the production of disciplined bodies, within which must be objectified those 'durable dispositions that recognise and comply with the specific demands of a given institutional area of activity' (Sommerlad, 2007, p. 194).

These concepts are well suited to explain and describe the acquisition of power by professional groups and the creation of norms in, for example, law (Sommerlad, 2007), health education (Adkins & Corus, 2009), professional practice (Green, 2009b) and public relations, (Edwards, 2006; Ihlen, 2009). Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the unconscious ways of doing things which only become visible when disrupted is also relevant here.

The professional habitus plays a significant role in defining what it is to be "a professional" and, like the other processes that define professional jurisdiction, its character is linked to the political, social and economic circumstances from which the profession has emerged (Edwards, 2010, p. 206)

Edwards cites Bourdieu's observation that new entrants to a profession "fall into line with the role . . . try to put the group on one's side by declaring one's recognition of the rule of the group and therefore of the group itself" (Bourdieu, 2000). Other writers on professional identity ground their work in social identity theory (e.g. Haslam, 2004) or the social constructionist view of identity (e.g. Broadbent, Dietrich, & Roberts, 1997). Here, narratives of self are shaped by professional identity, which extends far beyond remuneration, as "the 'I' cannot talk with the authority of a professional, cannot give an account of itself as a professional, unless the discursive association is prior held and legitimised in the eyes of others" (Broadbent et al., 1997, p. 4). This discursive professional identity distinguishes between 'objective' examination of discourses and language from the outside and the "subjective perspective of a particular participant in a community of practitioners who attaches particular meaning, significance, values and intentions to their ideas or utterances" (Kemmis, 2009, p. 29). A more detailed socio-cultural approach to identity is proposed by the 'circuit of culture' (du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997) in which identity is imagined at the individual, organisational and national levels, as one of a circuit of 'moments' (made up of representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation). This model helps elucidate the impact of blurred boundaries and loss of status in constructing contemporary professional identity, leading to confusion at all stages of the circuit of culture: images of professions become emptier as identity is eroded, production and consumption of professionalism is located in the external context of management and regulation has become notional, almost empty, in the process. This struggle for identity, whether organisational, individual or professional, is further complexified by the proliferation of communication channels and messages. "The 'explosion' of communication that we are witnessing . . . goes hand in hand with the question of identity. 'Standing out' with a distinct and recognizable identity in this cluttered environment is at once absolutely necessary and almost impossible" (Cheney & Christensen, 2001a, p. 231). Bauman and Vecchi (2004, p. 31) also note the loss of meaningful identity, leading to "growing demand for what may be called 'cloakroom communities' conjured into being . . . patched together for the duration of the spectacle".

Most writing on professional roles in recent decades, then, has taken the social constructivist approach, locating the professional self firmly in the social world. This is only recently echoed in public relations' scholarship which has tended to assess roles using management rather than sociological theory. Tsetsura's (2010) exploration of social construction and its relevance to public relations challenges this assumption, as do the contributions of above-cited writers like Edwards, Curtin and Gaither. However, I want to go back a bit, a century in the case of Jung; half a century to Goffman, to look at

their concepts of social enactment, which, I argue, represent a meeting place between the interior and exterior location of identity.

### 3. Goffman's performance

The sociologist Erving Goffman is being rediscovered and reinterpreted as an insightful commentator on our anxious times (Jacobsen, 2010), as his 'micro-sociology' continues to resonate across the half century since publication of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), which is the text explored in this paper. This explores how individual and team performances are constructed and maintained; Goffman talks about impression management in professions as a "rhetoric of training", whereby labor unions, universities, trade associations and other licensing bodies require practitioners to absorb a mystical range and period of training . . . to foster the impression that the licensed practitioner is someone who has been reconstituted by his learning experience and is now set apart from other men" (p. 46). He also explores the gulf between impressions 'given off' or consciously intended, and those 'given', often very different from the former. Importantly, while most strive to close that gap, it is the disruptions or failures that expose the artifice, revealing, as it were, the scene-shifters and props cupboard. This is not to suggest a manipulative intent, more the mechanisms by which cultural norms are observed and reproduced in professional (inter alia) settings.

When an individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects a definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part. When an event occurs which is expressively incompatible with this fostered impression, significant consequences are simultaneously felt in three levels of social reality (p. 242)

These levels are social structure; interaction and personality (p. 243). The first affects teams which may become confused by the disruption; then, audiences may question the individual's projected performance and indeed legitimacy; finally, an individual's ego may have identified with this aspect and the consequences affect his or her sense of self. Effort must be put into preserving one's own and others' 'face', or 'public self-image', in face-saving and face-threatening situations. This is about self-consciousness not self-forgetting (Finkelstein, 2007), and again, resonates with constant broadcasting not only about world events but about our own domestic lives, from romance to dinner. We are increasingly engaged in continuous digital impression management, selecting images, targeting our publics, updating on our every movement. There's a webcam backstage now; we are never "off". Finkelstein (2007) suggests Goffman's main contribution was positioning this negotiation as one of anxiety (p. 102), a fitting response to his times – and perhaps an explanation of the recent resurgence of interest. In this period, the stable universal sense of self that underpinned much earlier Western cultures has given way to a fragmented, contradictory self, a move heightened by postmodern thinkers, such as Merleau-Ponty. Goffman suggests that we search for a part that 'fits' and then learn the rules that govern that role. The actor may or may not believe his/her own lines, or may pass from self-belief through cynicism to a newly grounded belief over the course of a career; he cites the trajectory of priests for example. When we, or others, fail to perform our parts, perhaps becoming emotional or over-detached, it is noticed. Curious that Japanese culture is seen as highly formalised, when Anglo-American culture, as Goffman reveals, is as formal as a tea ceremony; only the rules are unwritten.

The dramaturgical metaphor (and he reminds readers it is a metaphor not a paradigm) brought many of these ideas into clear focus; we present different aspects of ourselves in different locations: sometimes backstage preparing; sometimes front of house, performing. It also yielded useful spatial concepts, like front, backstage, setting and so on. I suspect public relations has been largely concerned with the 'show'; I want to explore the backstage arena, a somewhat marginalised sphere in the contemporary culture of 'over-sharing'. As Dirda (2001, n.p.) says "the book reminds us that urban living transforms all of us not just into actors but often into broken-hearted clowns . . . the central problem of city life: interacting with other people".

#### 3.1. Goffman and PR identity

Goffman (1959) is cited occasionally in public relations literature; other work (e.g. Goffman, 1974) is not considered in this paper. The fullest exploration is Johansson's (2009) chapter which demonstrates the relevance of Goffman's concepts of face, impression management and symbolic interaction for public relations practice and theory, particularly in the context of co-creational understanding of communication. She shows how his precise observations of how presentation is operationalised, at a conscious and unconscious level, have relevance for practice, particularly his emphasis on interpersonal communication – central to the emerging field of relationship management. Tsetsura (2010) also argues for greater engagement with constructivist scholars, including Goffman, in PR literature to investigate the development of ". . . meanings as products of social construction and identity negotiations as processes of social construction" (p. 171). Goffman is also recommended to PR scholars by Brown (2010, p. 290) who notes how he and others "immersed themselves in the quotidian drama of social life and . . . created the foundation for the epistemological paradigm shift that has moved public relations beyond the biases of modernism and the limitations of symmetry". However, there remains considerable scope for further investigation (see final section).

I now want to turn to Carl Jung, who offers an interior journey into the construction of the self, not as a contingent, socially constructed edifice but as an entity drawn from a set of innate, universal components. Comparing and contrasting the two enables an inner and outer perspective on the self. First, the Jungian psyche must be introduced.

#### 4. Jung's Persona

Jung described the public face of the individual as the Persona, drawing on the Greek masks of ancient drama. Persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society, a kind of mask designed to 'impress and conceal' and to meet societal demands (Jung, CW7, paras 305–309). As the ego gravitates to the public 'approved' view, unconscious activity starts to compensate. The personal unconscious is structured around archetypal images, the templates of which are located in the collective unconscious (Jung's concept of shared human experience). Archetypes are organised in binary opposites in what can be either a creative or destructive tension, for example in the twins of Persona and Shadow, the former containing conscious, 'approved' elements of the personality, the latter the repository for all that is feared or despised in the individual. In other writing (Fawkes, 2010), I have characterised professions as psychic entities, containing the same elements as the individual psyche, configured, as with individuals, in their own particular way. This schema has often been applied to organisations (Corlett & Pearson, 2003; Feldman, 2004; Hede, 2007); Singer and Kimbles' (2004) elucidation of cultural complexes provides a frame for seeing professions as possessing both sociological and psychological qualities

... cultural complexes can be thought of arising out the cultural unconscious as it interacts with both the archetypal and personal realms of the psyche ... As such, cultural complexes can be thought of as forming the essential components of an inner sociology (p. 4).

Persona should not be viewed as a negative aspect of the psyche; it is essential to the acquisition of social skills and status and it also evolves over time; what Stein (1998) calls a 'competent' ego will negotiate a path between social expectations and inner needs, as it executes its object-relations function. When these functions deteriorate, fail to adapt to new situations or are not developed, help may be required. This will involve engaging with the shadow aspect of the organisation, individual or, here, profession towards a more balanced identity. This approach reveals schisms in identity and the price paid for failing to address discrepancies between the externalised, object-related presentation and the unmet needs of the internal psyche.

##### 4.1. Jung and PR

Apart from my own writing (see Fawkes, forthcoming), Jung's work is not found in PR literature, generally and has not been connected to the aspects of identity outlined in the introduction. If PR practitioners over-emphasise the Persona aspects of organisational identity, they may be fuelling hidden aspects, visible only to others or projected onto competitors. The generation of an idealised professional identity also has consequences for the field (Fawkes, 2010) and may lead to conflicting ethical identities (Fawkes, 2012). To repeat, Jung is clear the danger arises when the un-represented aspects are not merely omitted from promotional activities but excised from the collective consciousness of the organisation. On a positive note, Corlett and Pearson (2003, p. xv) suggest that what they call Jungian Organizational Theory is attractive to "managerial leaders who are open to new ideas for improving the effectiveness of their organizations, democratizing the workplace and re-energizing their work processes".

#### 5. Comparing Jung and Goffman

There are interesting convergences in Jung and Goffman's work, including shared phenomenological approaches to their deeply humane observations. Goffman's 'face' is very close to the Jungian Persona, the public self-image of the individual and a key element in constructing an identity. Both sense the reverse of that image too; Goffman describes practices and routines which represent the 'underlife' of organisations, citing the power of 'discrepant roles', and his backstage space resembles the hidden world of the Jungian Shadow. They deploy different metaphors: Jung's psyche is envisaged as the alchemical container for transformation; for Goffman, the metaphor is theatrical, but both use language more as literature than science (Dirda, 2010; Rowland, 2010). While I am not here exploring concepts of self, both share what Bauman and Vecchi (2004) much later call 'liquid' identity, in which multiple aspects of the psyche may be present in different contexts. (Interesting to note that Bauman's use of 'cloakroom communities' is also a dramaturgical image). Both also seem to recognise an existential grief or hollowness in the demands of social performance, as is reflected, for example, in both the title and content of Jung's (1933) *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* and this from Goffman (1959, p. 237):

Shared staging problems; concern for the way things appear; warranted and unwarranted feelings of shame; ambivalence about oneself and one's audience; these are some of the dramaturgic elements of the human situation.

However, I do not wish to gloss over the differences; indeed, they are of particular interest when considering the operation of professional identity. The crucial separation is that the sociological explanation of human interaction is located in the material plane of text, speech, physical gesture, while the Jungian explanation of the psyche is located in the interior, in the world of dreams, play, imagination. They study similar manifestations of identity – the construction of a self for consumption by the social world – but where Goffman brushes against the unconscious in his explanations of intended and unintended impressions, Jung dives right in, seeking to discover what is being concealed, waiting to be expressed. Goffman describes fitting in; Jung argues for the wholesale rejection of the social self in the journey to realise the deepest aspects of the eternal Self. The Jungian scholar Jones (2007, p. 130) describes Jung and postmodern psychology as "facing away from each other,

each reflecting something that is understated or dismissed in the discourse of the other” and I believe the same could be said of Goffman and Jung.

## 6. Implications for public relations

Goffman and Jung, despite their conflicting worldviews, offer a complementary understanding of identity, which is here revisited from a public relations perspective using the categories suggested earlier: (a) a commodity created for clients and employers; (b) its own ‘contested terrain’ as a field; and (c) the professional identity of practitioners.

As Johansson (2009) argues, we could use Goffman to examine how organisations ‘perform’ their roles, and revisit Motion’s (1999) exploration of the promotion of individuals, a topic with relevance to contemporary celebrity culture. For example, practitioners – particularly in the promotional fields – are valued for their ability to stage an event, a launch, put on a show. Crises have occurred when back stage and front become confused, such as comments made without realising mics or cameras are live. More generally, it is worth recalling the definition of public relations centres on “reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you” (CIPR, 2014). From a Jungian perspective, all these activities emphasise the Persona archetype, warning practitioners to pay attention to hidden elements that may erupt if not made conscious.

Further work could also be undertaken exploring and comparing Goffman’s and Bourdieu’s approaches to constructing public relations’ professional identity, building on Edwards (2006, 2010) and Ihlen (2009) and extending this discussion to include Jung. There is a resonance with Bourdieu’s practice, outlined above, in its grounding in everyday routines and unconscious tropes; also in the systematic transfer of required behaviours, very close to Goffman’s reference to professionalism as a ‘rhetoric of training’. All three scholars shed light on how a field is conceptualised and enacted, from Goffman’s observation on team work and how group identities are forged, through Bourdieu’s practice, to Jung’s understanding of in-groups and Others. I have considered how a Jungian approach would reconfigure existing concepts of public relations as a profession at length (Fawkes, forthcoming), suggesting that idealised versions of public relations have exacerbated shadow issues in the field, but have not integrated Goffman’s work into that project. Such reflections could deepen understanding of how a profession such as public relations constructs and presents its collective identity.

This is turn could help practitioners struggling to reconcile the ‘official versions’ of their role presented in texts and professional associations with their day to day experience, the very location of Goffman’s research. It is practitioners who have to negotiate this difficult social terrain, so subtly described by Goffman, embracing or resisting terminology (public relations or corporate communicator) and role (ethical guardian or advocate), among other tensions. Curtin and Gaither’s application (2005, 2007) of the circuit of culture to public relations could also be extended to include concepts from Goffman and Jung, providing an even richer framework for examining the performance of professional identity in individual practitioners. What these writers offer is a minute observation of the external construction of an identity, echoing the process whereby the actor learns his or her part, puts on a costume and addresses the audience ‘in character’. Like Bourdieu, Goffman helps explain how we learn to fit in; Jung highlights the price we might pay.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has explored a range of literature, from public relations scholarship and beyond, concerning professional identity, in order to illustrate the contribution that the sociological observations of Goffman and the psychological reflections of Jung might make to public relations identity, whether as a commodity for others or for our own profession and practitioners. Together these writers illuminate the inner and outer aspects of identity, suggesting several avenues for further research, and with implications for the construction of public relations identity at both collective and individual levels.

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