

# Erving Goffman and the sociology of the face



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The face is a useful subject within the study of sociology as it helps us look at such issues as the self, social acceptance and participation, relationships between individuals, illusions of the self intended to deceive, stigma, embellishment and even character and emotions.

For Goffman the term face refers to the social value someone believes they possess as a result of their taking a particular line within social contact, and this line thus being accepted. The line referred to is an expression of the individual's view of a situation and evaluation of themselves and of their fellow social participants [1967 p. 5]. For my study on the sociology of the face I will look specifically at the controversial issue of beauty and how this relates to the face and thereby the self; how perceptions of beauty affect social behaviour and conditioning; how they relate to insecurities, illusions and deceit; how they relate to character and emotions and how the issues raised relate to the image of women and gender relations in general. Throughout I will relate these issues to the work of Erving Goffman.

To begin I feel it necessary to have some further understanding of 'beauty' and what defines it both for the self and the social. According to the AAFPRS website (the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery), the "modern-day ideal face of beauty" belongs to actress Halle Berry. Dean Toriumi, the president of the world's largest association of facial plastic and reconstructive surgeons, stated that "Ms. Berry was likely chosen by our members because of her unblemished, smooth skin, full lips, large eyes, and delicate yet defined facial skeleton ..

. Today, beauty transcends race and colour and is truly dependent on the harmonious relationship of facial features” [2003]. The AAFPRS therefore help to understand what is the social’s idea of beauty; they also suggest an assessment of beauty and self-enhancement by the self through their data, which shows that, “ the majority of facial plastic surgery patients today seek to enhance the features they already have rather than want to look like someone else ... 5 percent of the AAFPRS surgeons said that an overall younger appearance and the removal of fine lines was the number one request by patients who visited their offices in 2002” [2003].

The results of the most popular form of facial reconstructive surgery support the prevalent belief within Western social thought that youth relates to beauty. Oscar Wilde supports this fact in his book *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when Lord Henry links being ugly with being old and unwanted, and flatters Dorian on his “ most marvellous youth” and “ wonderfully beautiful face” [1964 p. 0]. The infatuation of Dorian’s looks, appearance, personality and face by the self and the other throughout the book emphasise the role of beauty in making a face successful – it is successful because it is desirable, because it is distinguished and because the line attached to it, that of confidence, improvement and beauty, is in itself successful. Once the participants in Dorian’s life adopted this line, the self became dependent upon its existence. Dorian couldn’t bear the thought that he would one-day lose his good looks and therefore respected social standing.

The insecurities of the self and desperation to sustain his current face and line led Dorian to exclaim that “ when one loses one’s good looks ... one loses everything” [p.

35]. Dorian's face is a very significant element throughout the book. Yet the face as envisaged by Goffman refers not just to his beauty in appearance but the entire social projection of himself. This is cleverly separated from the 'real' self that is represented by the painting. As the real self suffers due to immoral and unkind acts the face of Dorian Gray constantly projects confidence and beauty.

Dorian Gray successfully attains this lifestyle as the social surrounding him abides by Lord Henry's observation that, "it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances" [p. 30]. Ultimately Dorian realises what the reader has known all along; that "his beauty had been to him but a mask, his youth but a mockery" [p. 217] as the perils of exuding such an illusionary line of perfect beauty came to fruition through his desperate insecurity, guilt of his deception and the real self he was hiding within.

Oscar Wilde offers further suggestion on the role of masks in creating an illusion about the self and strengthening a particular line, in his essay *The Truth of Masks*. Here Wilde discusses Shakespeare's use of costume to create dramatic effect, deceive the audience into believing what they are seeing is the truth, and to expressively convey the character of the actor [1948 p. 1000]. The use of costume and masks in the theatre as outlined by Wilde can be seen as a metaphor for the face and its line as expressed by Goffman in his essay *On Face Work*. Both refer to illusionary tactics to convey particular characteristics of an actor and expressive tactics to persuade the audience that the given line is the truth [Wilde 1948 p. 1004].

Wilde goes on to say that it is not the facts in Shakespeare's work that make it believable and accurate, but the Truth; attention to detail given on all areas of historical analysis, from costume to manner to events, supports Shakespeare's illusion and makes it a success [ibid. p. 1009]. If an individual has no mask or line whatsoever they will be poor social participants as they may offend the other or the self, or they may project a line that is undesirable and expose the true self to the unforgiving social. Goffman wrote that one of society's methods of mobilizing the individual to be self-regulating in social-encounters is through ritual.

“ He is taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face” [1967 p. 44]. If there is no face the suggestion is there is no self, and with no self comes no respect and ultimately society's disapproval. Some argue that conditions similar to these have led to detrimental perceptions of women in society. About-Face is a non-profit organisation that “ promotes positive self-esteem in girls and women of all ages, sizes, races and backgrounds through a spirited approach to media education, outreach and activism” [2003].

It looks in particular at the negative way in which women are portrayed in much of the advertising industry. Its work supports the above-mentioned comment that faces are vital in creating character and therefore necessary for a human to be recognised as such and subsequently be respected. The following advert and caption appeared on the website exactly as seen below:

“ Dismemberment or body-chopping in ads occurs more frequently for women than men. Women's bodies without heads, faces or feet lead us to

believe that all that truly matters about woman lies between her neck and her knees" (Cortese, 1999).

The concept of beauty has too led to defamations of women. Pressures from the social for women to be attractive, submissive and obedient lead to insecurities within the self about its social standing. Through ritual acts women are left to feel inadequate if they are embellished or old or do not fit into to the social's idea of beauty. This helps generate submissive and insecure characteristics for women, which strengthens the dominant male position in society. The number of female facial reconstructive patients as shown by the AAFRPS supports this, as do the look and manner of women in the media, in particular advertising.

By having only women with beautiful faces in an advert the social's concept of women and beauty is altered, thereby affecting the self. Likewise by having women in inferior, submissive positions the line adopted by the social male is one of power and dominance. Finally by removing the faces of women from adverts the social is being given the strongest message yet: that the woman has no face, no line, serves no purpose other than satisfying the social male and therefore deserves no respect or credence and can rightfully be ignored or abused.