

FRAME ANALYSIS

An Essay on
the Organization
of Experience

Erving Goffman

With a foreword by BENNETT M. BERGER

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spectacular secrets, ones whose disclosure would bring the law against the victim and turn some of the persons closest to him against him. But, of course, unspectacular embarrassments have some blackmail power, too. And given the ease of engineering unworthy behavior, planting false evidence, or bearing false witness, real secrets are not necessary; secrets-in-effect can be created, with the result that although the victim has not in any way contained those around him, he is in danger of appearing to have done so. So the reason why the individual can confidently continue to assume that others will feel he is playing matters straight is not that he is—even if he is—but that no one has been motivated to organize information in order to render him discreditable.

IV

So far but one way has been considered in which the individual can be caused to be out of touch with what it is that is really going on: he can be deceived, whether with benign or exploitive intent. Moreover, we allow that a person who is hoodwinked can be understandably gulled, he himself contributing to his containment only what would ordinarily bring him to a realistic alignment to the world.

Common sense allows for another possibility: "understandable error." We feel that the sense perceptions of an individual can work against his acquiring a realistic view of what it is that is going on, and excusably so, providing only that something special in the circumstances accounts for his error and that he is reasonably alive to the corrective information the world (we think) will soon provide him. (Indeed, a belief that the truth will out is a fundamental element in the cosmology of Western man.) One can speak here of "illusion." So there are deceptions and illusions.

In thinking about fabrications, whether of the benign or exploitive kind, it seems natural and obvious to see deceivers and the deceived as different persons, else, of course, strategic information could not be withheld, false facts could not be put forth, and a fabrication could hardly be sustained against discreditation. But one must press beyond this point if the class to which illusion and deception belong is to be fully developed.

For we have the understanding, vague, undeveloped, but none-

and apparently he does so remarkably well, the significance of which has never been adequately developed. Also the fabrication conventions are notoriously liberal: presumably any liberty can be taken with the original models in the dream in that any character can turn into any other character and simultaneously can be in many different places; in any case, it is hard to think of principled limitations, dreaming being something of a limiting case. Yet some of the conditions for dreaming are very strict: the dreamer must first be genuinely asleep, and the dream can be collapsed and shown to be merely a dream by waking up the dreamer—a waking he is vastly vulnerable to. (In this easy vulnerability, dreams are somewhat like leg-pulls.)

The question arises as to the relation between the world dreamed, that is, the innermost drama of the dreamed events, and the unfabricated environment of the dreaming—the room, the dreamer, and so forth.

It is plain that even when the dreamer, in his dream, represents the room in which he is dreaming, the representation is of an entirely different domain than the room itself. The room in the dream is being dreamed; it does not exist in space, although the room in which the dreaming occurs does.⁴⁹

Presumably the dreamer cannot put into his dream anything that is not in some sense already in him; he must make do with traces stored up from the past. Some of this material, apparently, is likely to be recently acquired. And, of course, some of what is used will be quite current; for there is the reasonable belief that dreaming in part protects the dreamer from being awakened by local disturbances. It can be argued that this dreamwork consists of the reframing of disruptive events—as when the sharp closing of the bedroom door is presented as a gunshot in the dream. (Here, in miniature, is a nice illustration of the whole role of framing in the reconstitution of events.)

Finally, the controversial issue of the active role the dreamer may take in his dreaming apart from generating the content of the dream. There are reasons for suggesting that when a dream is particularly unpleasant, the dreamer may discount its reality

49. See Margaret Macdonald, "Sleeping and Waking," in Donald F. Gustafson, ed., *Essays in Philosophical Psychology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, 1964), pp. 250–251.

theless there, that in various ways the individual may actively work against his own capacity for effective framing, setting himself against his own ability to realistically orient himself in the world. In some cases he may obtain help in his misconstruings from persons teamed up with or against him, and in some cases they themselves may not be deluded about what is going on, having intentionally laid the groundwork for it. But still, without the very active cooperation of the dupe, here at least, it is unlikely he would be taken in. Note, self-induced misalignment is likely to involve mainly perception, not action, for the latter must soon face corrective action from others.⁴⁶

If, then, one thinks of *deception* as falsehood intendedly produced by persons not taken in by their own fabrication and one thinks of *illusion* as error resulting from a misconstruing that no one induced purposely and that is understandable in the circumstances, then one can think of *self-deception* (or delusion) as wrongheadedness actively aided, if not solely produced, by the head that is wrong.⁴⁷

With delusion one has defects in what is taken to be the fundamental character of normal actors. An individual equipped and geared with one of these eccentric features grinds out a stream of behavior whose frame he, and often he alone, is blind to. In the case of some of these defects, a pass can be made at stating the transformations which they perform on ordinary conduct; in other cases, only a gloss is possible.

1. An interesting form of self-deception is the dream.⁴⁸ Here, surely, the individual all on his own is his own deceiver. Dreams are special in that only the dreamer can have any appreciation of what is going on while it is going on and any memory thereof—even though others can figure as protagonists in the dream, be fairly sure that dreaming is occurring, and be told of the dream after it is over. Dreams have other interesting features. The dreamer himself must in some sense take all the dramatic parts,

46. An argument recommended by Lee Ann Draud.

47. A useful statement is provided by Amelie O. Rorty, "Belief and Self-Deception," *Inquiry*, XV (1972): 387-410, to whom I am grateful for help in this and other matters philosophical.

48. On the dream as a type of experience to be analyzed by looking at its similarities and differences to other modes of experience, see Norman Malcolm, *Dreaming* (New York: Humanities Press, 1959).

rarily.⁵² He cannot—in the ordinary sense—be wakened from his construction because he has not gone to sleep to produce it. However, with psychotic beliefs, as with dreams, a coming to is possible. This coming to is called getting insight, and it is said that psychotherapy can bring it about. A point to note, however, is that it is part of our belief regarding insanity that this coming to need never occur. The individual can remain locked in his "illness" forever.

It is possible to try to describe the sense in which an individual defined as insane is seen as an incompetent, faulty actor. One could also try to write the rules for transforming ordinary behavior into the kind that would evoke the feeling from witnesses that the actor was insane. Here again frame analysis has some application. Thus, it is argued that one of the upsetting things "psychotics" do is to treat literally what ordinarily is treated as metaphor, or at least to seem to do so.⁵³ (I have seen patients approach a friendly staff person and, apparently as a put-on, direct a hostile gesture toward him, this gesture proving, upon further examination, to be in quotes, part of a storytelling, an illustration performed on the staff person of an interaction that had occurred to the patient in the past.)

4. Psychotic propensities can place the subject in the world of social frameworks and the real-life doings performed within these frames, but do so on radically disqualifying terms. An interesting contrast is with another form of self-delusion: so-called hysterical symptoms. Here (in theory) the individual simulates a

52. The classic study here, of course, is C. Lasègue and J. Falret, "La Folie à deux ou folie communiquée," *Ann. Méd. Psychol.*, XVIII (1877): 321-355, available in translation by Richard Michaud in *American Journal of Psychiatry*, supp. to no. 4 (1964), pp. 2-23. One of the great illustrative sagas is D. H. Ropschitz, "Folie à Deux," *Journal of Mental Science*, CIII (1957): 589-596, wherein is recounted how an M.D. patient in a mental hospital succeeded temporarily in taking over the management of the establishment by enlisting the love of the head matron.

53. See, for example, Harold Searles, "The Differentiation between Concrete and Metaphorical Thinking in the Recovering Schizophrenic Patient," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytical Association*, X (1962): 22-49. (Also in his *Collected Papers on Schizophrenia and Related Subjects* [New York: New York University Press, 1965], pp. 560-589.) See also Gregory Bateson, "A Theory of Play and Phantasy," *Psychiatric Research Reports* 2, American Psychiatric Association (December 1955), pp. 39-51; reprinted in Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), pp. 177-193.

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physical disorder, an act to be defined within a natural (in this case the physical-medical) framework, but one part of himself is kidding another. Genuine regression, if there is such a thing, is another case in point.

5. Finally consider hypnotism. Here the active intervention of the hypnotist is presumably necessary, but nonetheless a degree of self-deception would seem to be implied. It is of special interest that the rules for behaving as though hypnotized and the formula for producing and terminating the state are fairly well articulated, providing a sort of model of framing conventions. Martin Orne's version may be cited:

The common characteristics of these various [hypnotic] states that bring them all under the heading of "hypnosis" would appear to include: posthypnotic amnesia, apparent inability to use a given motor system when a functional paralysis is suggested, various sensory illusions including positive and negative hallucinations of all sensory modalities, apparent memory disturbances or improvements as well as reported increased control over autonomic nervous system functions.⁵⁴

The implication of these behavioral features for our conception of the character of the person in trance will be considered later.

V

After distinguishing between benign and exploitive fabrications, a different division has now been suggested: other-induced (whether benign or exploitive) and self-imposed. Consider now the bearing of fabrication on social structures. What is the relation of a particular fabrication to the ongoing stream of wider social activity in which it occurs?

If one starts with a social activity for which there is a prescribed involvement, a prescribed spirit and depth of participation, it is simple enough to consider the types of alternate involvement that may occur. First, as already suggested, is the understanding that persons such as janitors, stagehands, newspapermen, waiters, and servants may be involved in only a very

54. Martin T. Orne, "The Nature of Hypnosis: Artifact and Essence," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, LVIII (1959): 278.