



# 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

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