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Article

“So, tell me about yourself…”

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Abstract: This essay applies the theories of Erving Goffman and symbolic interactionism to an everyday experience with high stakes –a job interview with an unusual, trick variation of the classic job interview question “tell me about yourself.” It proposes four possible answers and weighs their likelihood of success. This essay begins with a discussion of the subtle rules of a job interview. It then further explains how, when the classic job interview question was given a twist, the context and the dynamic of the job interview would have changed. Next, it proposes and analyses the four possible answers using Goffman’s theory and symbolic interactionism. It argues that these theories provide insights to answer this tricky interview question and that social theories can help us better understand human relationships and the construction of social identities.

Keywords: dramaturgical self, Erving Goffman, symbolic interactionism, performances, job interviews

Introduction

A friend of mine once told me about a job interview question that was so difficult that I have pondered it for many years since. The question is bitingly familiar and a trick version of one of the most commonly asked job interview questions. I shall paraphrase the variation as follows:

> "So, imagine you are taking a GO train somewhere. You sit down in one of the seats, and the person who sits across from you asks, 'So, tell me about yourself.' What would your answer be?"

GO Train here refers to commuter train services in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area that provide as many as 70 million rides a year (GO Transit, n.d.), so a familiar enough imaginary setting for job seekers applicants at the downtown Toronto location where this particular interview was held. Yet this version of a classic interview question for which all interviewees are expected to have prepared is designed to disrupt the regular flow of the interview and to create a challenge.

I begin this essay by discussing the subtle rules in a job interview and how job interviews, more overtly than other common interactions, are perceived as performances. Indeed, I argue that the tension between the acknowledged and appropriate performativity of job interviews and our desire for authenticity in social interactions is what makes this question so difficult. I propose three possible answers to the GO train version that are informed by Erving Goffman's perspective of dramaturgy. I first analyse the lowest-hanging fruit of an answer: the bald truth. Although this response is the most honest, it is unlikely to satisfy the subtle expectations of an interview. The next suggested answer is a more calculated one, and it will demand the least amount of work from the job interviewer. The final two answers that I propose draw on symbolic interactionism to address how social interactions in different contexts continuously define and refine meaning. This approach allows the interviewee to answer the GO train question in an intelligent, yet surprisingly simple way.

Why is the GO Train Version a More Difficult Question?

From the sociological perspective, "tell me about yourself" is an interesting question because it highlights some unspoken rules understood by all social actors. A conventional job interview is structured in the format of question-and-answer. The interviewer(s) ask the job interviewee(s) the same set of questions, and the interviewer(s) evaluate the answers, often based on a standardised point system (Levashina et al., 2014). The process itself is very different from everyday conversation, where the norms of "good manners" regulate the frequency and the length of turns of talk of each speaker (Warren et al., 2003, p. 97). Most conversation comprises equal amounts of "talk time," unless the participants share an understanding that the conversation will focus on one of the participants. These norms do not apply to an interview, where the interviewee has the floor for a longer time and must elaborate on each of her answers. What is more, the storytelling – that is, the life biography narrated by an interviewee – is restricted to the interviewer's interest, and the interviewer has much more control over the setting (Allan, 2011). The interviewee can only directly influence her own performance; an unspoken rule obliges a candidate to align her look with the interviewer's work culture and expectations of professionalism. In short, job seekers choose clothing, hairstyles, makeup, or jewellery requirements that are more conservative than their everyday choices to try and appear both more approachable and employable in an unfamiliar environment where the stake of first impressions is high (Allan, 2011; McFarland et al., 2003; Whitcomb, 2004).

The classic version of the question is a warm-up question described at length in best-selling, mass-market publications about job interviews like *Knock 'em Dead Job Interviews (Yate, 2013),* It allows the candidate to deliver what is referred to as an "elevator pitch," a two-to-three minutes summary of her background and her biggest assets that emphasises what differentiates her from other candidates. It is not an invitation for free-range expressions about the interviewee's family, hobbies, or other non-confrontational conversation topics like local sports teams and favourite ice cream flavours. Jay A. Block and Michael Betrus, authors of *Great Answers, Great Questions for Your Job Interview* (2014) describe how the classic question "tests [the interviewee's] composure, communication skills, and ability to develop rapport with the interviewer." (Block & Betrus, 2014, p. 168). They advise the candidate to prepare a 60-second script that '"break[s] the ice" in the first 30 seconds with an overview of achievements and a second half that mentions recent professional and academic accomplishments that highlight qualifications for the particular position (Block & Betrus, 2014, p. 168). In short, the candidate is expected to answer this question as if she were being asked, "Why should I hire you?"

Carole Martin, author of *What to Say in Every Job Interview* (2014), describes an answer that reveals personal information that gives "the interviewer reason to doubt whether she was an employee who would stay for very long" as "tragic" (Martin, 2014, Chapter 5, A Tragic Example: "Tell me About Yourself" section). Martin provides an example of such a misguided response that is worth quoting in full:

> I'm happily married, and originally from Denver. My husband was transferred here three months ago, and I've been getting us settled in our new home. I'm now ready to go back to work. I've worked in a variety of jobs, usually customer service related. I'm looking for a company that offers growth opportunities (Martin, 2014, Chapter 5, A Tragic Example: "Tell me About Yourself" section, para 2).

Eleanor's answer, which Martin suggests should focus on the position's job description, would be quite appropriate in the imaginary GO train interaction with a complete stranger who has reached out to the candidate unprompted.

The GO train variation is more interesting than the classic question for two main reasons: it not only demonstrates an interviewer's intention to disrupt the conventions of the interview process but also requires the interviewee to adhere to the norms underlying the interview process in response to the interviewer's disruption. The GO train question will take even a well-prepared candidate by surprise. Instead of letting the candidate ease into her role, the interviewer changes the controlled parameters to end the performance and ostensibly offers the interviewee an opportunity to reveal her authentic self.

A job interview requires the job interviewee to exhibit deference towards the interviewer (Allan, 2011). The interviewer has the upper hand in the encounter and can safely engage in what Allan describes as "aggressive face-work"—that is testing the interviewee's ability to maintain face, (Allan, 2011, p. 80). If the interviewer believes that stress can help her to get to know the "real" interviewee, she may intentionally disrupt the conversation to observe how the interviewee will handle the challenge and repair the interaction.

The interviewer's unspoken demand for authenticity in this unexpected variation of a conventional warm-up question is at odds with Goffman's theory about social interaction (Goffman, 1959). Our society assumes that most interactions are genuine and only a few, like a job interview, are overt performances. Goffman, however, posits that even a common interaction can be analysed as an expression of the dramaturgical self because we all actively engage in impression management. We present a "self" in all social encounters, often by responding to indirect cues from another person, which could be simply "subtle shadings in his tone of voice, or a change in his posture" (Goffman, 1959, p. 181). For Goffman, impression management is such a routine activity that it is not intrinsically deceitful (Goffman, 1959). In light of Goffman's observations about self-presentation, I argue that it does not matter that the job interview is more widely perceived as staged: what is most important is that the interviewee can deliver the performance convincingly not only because we value honesty, but also because the ability to perform convincingly is a transferable skill that can help the job candidate perform well in the day-to-day business setting.

The Most Common and Most Probable Answer

How would a candidate handle the GO train question under such pressure? Unable to adapt a prepared and practiced elevator pitch to a new format and context in but a few moments, many candidates would fall back on a basic instinct to answer the question honestly. I have asked many of my friends what they would do if they encountered this question in a job interview, and most of them have replied with what they all present to me as the truth, something like, "I am not going to say anything because I do not know this person and would be wary of their intentions."

As a seasoned GO train rider who uses the service almost every weekday, my ongoing observations confirm that the GO train question posits a disruption of the normative behaviour on a commuter train that services a big city in North America like Toronto. Many daily commuters practice civil inattention and often blatantly ignore the familiar faces who travel alongside them day after day (Goffman, 2008; Ocejo & Tonnelat, 2014). Goffman writes extensively about civil inattention:

> When persons are mutually present and not involved together in conversation or other focused interaction... one gives to the other[s] enough visual notice to demonstrate that one appreciates that the other[s are] present (and that one admits openly admits to seeing

> [them]), while at the next moment withdrawing one's attention from them so as to express that [they do] not constitute [targets] of special curiosity or design (Goffman, 2008, p. 1246).

In fact, the GO train implemented a well-received and popular "quiet zone" on the upper-level of all coaches during rush hours (O'Connor, 2013). In short, GO train riders do not expect to start a conversation with a fellow passenger with whom they are not already familiar, and a fellow rider who approaches someone like this in a real-life situation is often eyed suspiciously.

Two of Goffman's concepts, namely "front stage" and "back stage," help explain the norms on a GO train. Goffman posits that there is a front stage and a backstage for a social actor's performance. The front stage is where the person most consciously attempts to adhere to the image that she tries to project. In contrast, the back stage is the private setting where a social actor can relax and prepare for her front stage performance. The back stage is often associated with the private sphere of a person's life, and this is space is necessary for a person to recharge and continue to support their roles in the public sphere. For most commuter rail riders, the commuter train is a back stage, where they take up the "non-performer" roles (Zarghooni, n.d., p. 8). The workplace here is the front stage, likely the starting point or the destination of her ride, and interactions with strangers that require more energy and effort are out of place.

In addition, for many travelers, the ride itself is considered what Allan describes as an "unfocused encounter" (Allan, 2011, p. 83). Goffman describes how these kinds of interactions differ from the focused interactions that we have with people within our social networks: "In this realm of unfocused interaction, no one participant can be officially "given the floor"; there is no official center of attention" (Goffman, 2008, p. 491). In short, unlike interactions with family, friends, and coworkers, "when persons gather close together and openly cooperate to sustain a single focus of attention, typically by taking turns at talking," a chance encounter with another rider on a commuter train "has to do largely with the management of sheer and mere co-presence" (Goffman, 2008, p. 341). Certainly, GO train riders can and do choose to talk to each other, but this hypothetical situation is neither the norm on the GO train nor an interaction especially analogous to interactions in the work environment.

A truthful answer to this variation, at worst, does have the potential to hurt a candidate's success. If the interviewer is unfamiliar with the dynamics and norms on a Toronto-area commuter train, she might interpret a truthful answer to the GO train question poorly. To declare "I am not going to say anything because I do not know this person well" may be interpreted as a cue to the potential employer that the candidate is suspicious, reserved, or even anti-social.

A truthful answer is, at best, unlikely to distinguish an interviewee from other candidates. A successful narrative in a job interview should go beyond a person's social identities or even personal identities to present the ego identity, the life biography to which the interviewee feels emotionally attached. The ego identity is "first of all a subjective, reflexive matter that necessarily must be felt by the individual whose identity is at issue" (Goffman, 1986, p. 106). The ego identity, like social identities and personal identities, is constructed with the same cues and categorical expectations and is what differentiates an individual from her peer group, whereas social identities or personal identities place a person on a social map (Allan, 2012). An ego identity, if competently presented in a job interview, makes a job candidate memorable because it makes the performance authentic. On the one hand, an interviewee will gain an advantage, if her social identities align with the mandate or mission statement of the company. On the other hand, failing to differentiate her from other applicants will hurt a candidate's confidence and affect her performance.

The Real Frame and the Make-Believe Key

A candidate who is quick on her feet might come up with several potential answers to this tricky variant of the elevator pitch. One cleverly simple reply would be an effective segue that provides an opportunity to deliver the prepared elevator speech, something like:

"Well, I consider any opportunities in life as a chance to promote myself. So, I often fall back on my prepared 90-seconds introduction for job interviews in situations like this one."
The reply uses a "bridge," a literary device that allows the conveyer to travel back to a known path. It is less important whether in real life the job candidate would actually deliver the speech to a stranger on a GO train. This kind of reply has its advantages because it not only fosters the impression the candidate is quick and able to think on her feet, but also that she is a competent businessperson who understands the value of self-promotion. More importantly, she is able to save face by addressing the aggressive face-work appropriately: she accepts the challenge, repairs the interaction, and restores the equilibrium, while maintaining deference to the interviewer.

This answer is also artful in that it signals that the interviewee recognises the need to modulate interactions according to specific social contexts. In other words, it explicitly acknowledges the make-believe "key" created by the interviewer and further adopts and modifies it in order to providing an answer for the interview itself, the real frame of the interaction. Let me further explain by introducing Goffman's notion of frames and keys. Goffman uses the term "frame" to describe a cognitive structure that we use to organise our experience. Frames are what "pick out certain elements of a situation to pay attention to and others to ignore" and are what govern our subjective experience (Allan, 2012, p. 83). Frames are also the tool that we use to classify real experience and less real experience (Allan, 2012, p. 83-84). This concept has a helpful analogue in music theory. Primary frames may be written in one key, but can also be "transposed into another key" to create a different sound. In the interview scenario, the classic version is the original key, and the GO train its transposed version is a modified key, a make-believe scenario. By asking the GO train question, the interviewer has created an additional key (frame) to which the interviewee is being asked to modulate. The self-promotional answer provides an answer that acknowledges the relationship between the frames. In a theatrical setting, an actor will sometimes step out of the story plot (i.e., out of character) to address to the audience directly. This answer is similar to such a dramatic act, but it is still a subtle refusal to participate in the interviewer's make-believe scenario. So this answer that focuses on self-promotion has the same potential to backfire as the honest answer if the interviewer is looking to hire a candidate who will engage with their unusual question.

The impression projected by this kind of answer also has other drawbacks. First, it is somewhat brisk and business-like. Although the professional tone might be appropriate for those seeking employment in positions and industries that rely heavily on self-promotion, it does not project a warm and caring image that is more appropriate in other environments, for example much of healthcare and education. An answer like this is especially tricky for female job seekers whose unabashed self-promotion is more likely to be perceived as a character flaw (Miller et al., 1992). In addition, there is an issue of consistency with this kind of reply. The image projected by this answer should be aligned to the ego identity projected by the other answers. If the job candidate fails to project herself as a confident businessperson who will indeed grasp every opportunity for self-promotion, this answer will be deemed inauthentic.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism offers a less fraught way to contextualise the situation and ace the answer and interview. Symbolic interactionism posits that humans differentiate themselves from the rest of the animal kingdom by their use of language. Language is the tool that allows us to share and construct knowledge, transcend our direct experience, and understand ourselves as "divorced from the constraints of time" and "a transcendent thing that does not exist in the immediacy of experience" (Allan, 2012, p. 37). In brief, symbolic interactionism argues that the self exists as a direct result of our ability to contextualise ourselves as part of our society.

Symbolic interactionism also highlights the importance of "meaning" and how meaning emerges through the situation itself: "the meaning of any idea, moral, word, symbol, or object is pragmatically determined, or determined by its practical use" (Allan, 2012, p. 33). Allan identifies three distinct steps before an interaction is possible:

> First, an initial cue is given. But the cue itself doesn't carry any specific meaning. Let's say you see a person crying in the halls at school. What does it mean? It could mean lots of things. In order to determine – or, more properly, achieve – meaning there has to be a response to the cue, "Is everything all right?" Yet, we still don't have meaning. There must be a response to the response. After the three phases (cue, response, and response to the response), a meaning emerges: "Nothing's wrong, my boyfriend just asked me to marry him" (Allan, 2012, pp. 33-34).

In short, the communicators determine the meaning of an interaction, even if one of the communicators, as in the case of an interviewer, has more power than the other.

In the GO train situation, the question, "tell me about yourself" is a recognised cue for a response in an unexpected context. Indeed, given how frequently this question is asked in job interviews, if someone indeed were to ask a fellow passenger on a GO train the question posed with just this phrasing, it might likely be interpreted as a power play with malicious intent. The meaning of the action, however, is not defined at the point of asking, nor does the setting predetermine it. The person who responds to the question still has an opportunity to redefine the context such that it is possible to define a contextually appropriate response.

There are two distinct ways to gather the necessary information to craft a meaningful answer that would support an individual's candidacy. First, the interviewee might acknowledge the unusualness of the question by identifying it as humourous (e.g., "Ha! Is this a job interview?"). Second, the interviewee might acknowledge the lack of contextual cues for how to reply appropriately by redirecting the question back to the interviewer/fellow passenger (e.g., "I wouldn't know where to start! Tell me a little bit about yourself first?). Both actions would cue a response with more information. There is no reason why fellow GO train riders should not talk to each other, and even as a common backstage, a GO train can become a front stage if the participants agree to interact. This kind of reply acknowledges that focused interactions are simply not customary in some public spaces and that trust has to be earned differently in different contexts. If the person who initiates the question indeed only wants to start a casual conversation (and I have chatted very happily with many a tourist and fellow booklover), he or she would provide additional cues about appropriate topics in their own discourse. Then, she can decide whether and what to share.

Conclusion

The job interview is notoriously ineffective as a tool to assist an employer to find the best candidate. Thus, it is no surprise that some interviewers will resort to situational questions or to the "brain teaser" questions, such as "how many quarters - placed one on top of the other –

would it take to reach the top of the Empire State Building?" (Peterson, n.d.). These brainteaser questions often serve more as a conversation starter than an evaluation of a specific skill; when answering this type of question, it is more important to demonstrate logical thinking than to arrive at the correct answer (Peterson, n.d.).

Erving Goffman's writings about dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism provide an effective strategy for answering this tricky job interview question. Social theories are more than abstract theories. They can be applied to help us better understand our identities and our social relationships. This paper applied Goffman's theories and symbolic interactionism to a daily life interaction with considerable stakes, namely a job interview, but the ability to apply theories in practice by identifying the subtle cues of social contexts and providing well-informed explanations of social conduct in a creative and interesting way is transferable in many walks of life – or should I say, on many rides.

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