

Dramaturgy

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Dramaturgy is a sociological perspective stemming from symbolic interactionism. The term was first adapted into sociology from the theatre by Erving Goffman, who developed most of the related terminology and ideas in his 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Kenneth Burke, whom Goffman would later acknowledge as an influence, had earlier presented his notions of dramatism in 1945 which, in turn, derives from Shakespeare.

In dramaturgical sociology it is argued that human actions are dependent upon time, place, and audience. In other words, to Goffman, the self is a sense of who one is, a dramatic effect emerging from the immediate scene being presented. Goffman forms a theatrical metaphor in defining the method in which one human being presents itself to another based on cultural values, norms, and expectations. Performances can have disruptions (actors are aware of such) but most are successful. The goal of this presentation of self is acceptance from the audience through manipulation. If the actor succeeds, the audience will view the actor as he or she wants to be viewed. This makes it an intimate form of communication, highlighting it as a micro-level sociological theory.

Dramaturgical perspective

Dramaturgical perspective is one of several sociological paradigms separated from other sociological theories because it does not examine the cause of human behavior but the context. In a number of Goffman's texts, he emphasizes that what a person "really is" is not only undiscoverable, but also arbitrary in its nature. In *Frame Analysis*, he writes, "What is important is the sense he provides them through his dealing with them of what sort of person he is behind the role he is in" (p. 298). The dramaturgy perspective can be seen as an anchor to this perspective, where the individual's identity is performed through role(s), and consensus between the actor and the audience. Because of this dependence on consensus to define social situations, the perspective argues that there is no concrete meaning to any interaction that could not be redefined. Dramaturgy emphasizes expressiveness as the main component of interactions. It is termed a "fully two-sided view of human interaction".

Dramaturgical theory suggests that a person's identity is not a stable and independent psychological entity; it is constantly remade as the person interacts with others.

In a dramaturgical model, social interaction is analyzed as if it were part of a theatrical performance. People are actors who must convey their personal characteristics and their intentions to others through performances. As on the stage, people in their everyday lives manage settings, clothing, words, and nonverbal actions to give a particular impression to others. This is called "impression management". Goffman makes an important distinction between "front stage" and "back stage" behavior. As the term implies, "front stage" actions are visible to the audience and are part of the performance. People engage in "back stage" behaviors when no audience is present.

For example, a server in a restaurant is likely to perform one way in front of customers but might be much more casual in the kitchen. It is likely that he or she does things in the kitchen that might seem unseemly in front of customers.

Before an interaction with another, an individual typically prepares a role, or impression, that he or she wants to make on the other. These roles are subject to what is in theater termed "breaking character." Inopportune intrusions may occur, in which a backstage performance is interrupted by someone not meant to see it. In addition, there are examples of how the audience for any personal performance plays a part in determining the course it takes: how typically we ignore many performance flaws out of tact, such as if someone trips or spits as they speak.

Goffman first brought dramaturgy into the language of social psychology and sociology with his publication *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The book explores a multitude of interactions whereby we in everyday life engage in performances of the self in a way similar to an actor portraying a character.

Performance

There are seven important elements Goffman identifies with respect to the performance:

Belief in the part one is playing is important, even if it cannot be judged by others. The audience can only try to guess whether the performer is sincere or cynical.

The front or 'the mask' is a standardized, generalizable and transferable technique for the performer to control the manner in which the audience perceives him or her.

Dramatic realization is a portrayal of aspects of the performer that s/he wants the audience to know. When the performer wants to stress something, s/he will carry on the dramatic realization.

Idealization. A performance often presents an idealized view of the situation to avoid confusion (misrepresentation) and strengthen other elements (fronts, dramatic realization). Audiences often have an 'idea' of what a given situation (performance) should look like and performers will try to carry out the performance according to that idea.

Maintenance of expressive control refers to the need to stay 'in character'. The performer has to make sure that s/he sends out the correct signals and quiets the occasional compulsion to convey misleading ones that might detract from the performance.

Misrepresentation refers to the danger of conveying the wrong message. The audience tends to think of a performance as genuine or false, and performers generally wish to avoid having an audience disbelieve them (whether they are being truly genuine or not).

Deception refers to the concealment of certain information from the audience, whether to increase the audience's interest in the user or to avoid divulging information which could be damaging to the performer.

Teams

Teams are groups of individuals who cooperate with each other, although teams of one person (performing solo) do exist in Goffman's terminology. Team members must cooperate and share the 'party line'. Team members must share information. Any mistake reflects on everyone. Trust is critical. Roles don't have to be equal. Team members also have inside knowledge and are not fooled by one another's performances.

Stages

Stages or regions refer to the three distinct areas where different individuals with different roles and information can be found. There are three stages: front, back and outside.

Front stage

Front stage is where the performance takes place and the performers and the audience are present. It is a part of the dramaturgical performance that is consistent and contains generalized ways to explain the situation or role the actor is playing to the audience that observes it. This is a fixed presentation. Goffman says that the front stage involves a differentiation between setting and personal front. These two concepts are necessary for the actor to have a successful performance. Setting is the scene that must be present in order for the actor to perform; if it is gone, the actor cannot perform.

Personal front consists of items or equipment needed in order to perform. These items are usually identifiable by the audience as a constant representation of the performance and actor. The personal front is divided into two different aspects, appearance and manners. Appearance refers to the items of the personal front that are a reflection of the actor's social status. Manner refers to the way an actor conducts himself. The actor's manner tells the audience what to expect from his performance.

Back stage

Back stage is where performers are present but audience is not, and the performers can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance. It is where facts suppressed in the front stage or various kinds of informal actions may appear. The back stage is completely separate from the front stage. No members of the audience can appear in the back. The actor takes many methods to ensure this. It is difficult to perform once a member of the audience is in the back stage.

When performers are in the back region, they are nonetheless in another performance: that of a

loyal team member. Back region is a relative term, it exists only in regards to a specific audience: where two or more people are present, there will almost never be a true 'back region'.

Outside

Outside, or off-stage, is the place where individuals are not involved in the performance (although they may not be aware of it).

Borders

Borders or boundaries are important as they prevent or restrict movement of individuals between various regions. Performers need to be able to manoeuvre boundaries to manage who has the access to the performance, when and how. The border phenomena is highlighted by Victor Turner's liminality-concept, and thus prolonged in the imaginable field: semiotics of ritual. The management of thresholds may be operated on several axes; the most crude is exclusion-inclusion, similar to the basic digital on-off (1 - 0); to be a part or not may be seen as the fundamental asset in a society; but as far society is perceived as a rhizomatic conglomerate; rather such than a unitary, or arborescent whole; border-control, so to say, becomes in a paradoxical fashion the central issue. Thus the study of liminality in sociology, ritual and theatre reveals the fictional elements underpinning society. Rites of passage seem to reflect this as the enactments of exclusion, and dissociation seem to be an essential feature of such. The enactment of exclusion from a society seem to be essential for the formation of an imaginary central governing (cf. Michel Foucault).

Discrepant roles

Many performances need to prevent the audience from getting some information (secrets). For that, several specialized roles are created.

Secrets

There are different types of secrets which have to be concealed for various reasons:

Dark secrets. Those represent information about the performing team which could contradict the image the team is presenting to the audience.

Strategic secrets. Those represent team's goals, capabilities and know-how which allows the team to control the audience and lead it in the direction the team desires

Inside secrets. Those represent information known by the team and are seen as something that is shared only with other teammates to increase team bonding.

Entrusted secrets. Those have to be kept in order to maintain the role and team integrity; keeping them demonstrates trustworthiness.

Free secret. Another's secret, not related to oneself and one that can be disclosed while still maintaining the role. Disclosure of such secrets should not affect the performance.

Roles

There are three basic roles in Goffman's scheme, each centered on who has access to what information. Performers are most knowledgeable. Audiences know only what the performers disclosed and what they have observed themselves. Outsiders have little if any relevant information.

The roles can be divided into three groups and include:

Roles dealing with manipulation information and team borders:

The "informer": a pretender to the role of a team member who gains teams trust, is allowed backstage, but then joins the audience and discloses information on the performance. Examples: spies or traitors.

The "Shill": this role is an opposite of the informant; the shill pretends to be a member of the audience but is a member of the performing team. His role is to manipulate the audience reactions.

The "Spotter": a member of the audience who has much information about the performance in general. The spotter analyzes the performers and may reveal information to the audience. Example: food critic in a restaurant.

Roles dealing with facilitating interactions between two other teams:

The "go-between" or "mediator": usually acts with the permission of both sides, acting as a mediator and/or messenger, facilitating communication between various teams. Go-between learn many secrets, and may not be neutral.

Roles that mix front and back region up:

The "non-person": individuals who are present during the performance, may even be allowed in the back stage but are not part of the "show". Their role is usually obvious and thus they are usually ignored by the performers and the audience. Example: a waiter, cleaning lady.

The "service specialist": individuals whose specialized services are required, usually by the performers. They are often invited by the performers to the back region. Example: hairdresser, plumbers, bankers with tax knowledge.

The "colleague": individuals who are similar to the performers but are not members of the team in question. Example: coworkers.

The "confidant": individuals to whom the performer reveals details of the performance.

Communication out of character

Performers may act out of character on purpose (usually in the back stage) or by accident (if in front stage).

Common backstage communications out of character include:

Treatment of the absent: derogatory discussion of the absent audience or performers affecting team cohesion.

Staging talk: discussion of technical aspects of the performance, gossip.

Common frontstage communications out of character include:

Team collusion: between team members, during the performance but not endangering it. Example: staging cues, kicking a friend under a table.

Realigning actions: between members of opposing teams. For example: unofficial grumbling.

Impression management

Impression management refers to work on maintaining the desired impression. It is composed of defensive and protective techniques. Defensive techniques are employed before an interaction starts and involve:

Dramaturgical loyalty: work to keep the team members loyal to the team members and to the performance itself.

Dramaturgical discipline: dedicating oneself to the performance but without losing oneself in it. Self-control, making sure one can play the part properly, rehearsal.

Dramaturgical circumspection: minimizing risk by preparing for expected problems. Being careful to avoid situations where a mistake or a potential problem can occur, choosing the right audience, length and venue of performance.

Protective techniques are used once the interaction begins in order to cover mistakes. For example, relying on audience to use tact and overlook mistakes of the performers.

Critique

It has been argued that dramaturgy should only be applied in instances that involve people associated with a total institution. The theory was designed for total institutions and some believe that theories should not be applied where they have not been tested.

In addition to this, it also has been said that dramaturgy does not contribute to sociology's goal of understanding the legitimacy of society. It is claimed to be drafting on positivism, which does not

offer an interest in both reason and rationality; John Welsh called it a "commodity".

Dramaturgy applied

Research on this is best done through fieldwork such as participant observation.

For one, dramaturgy has been used to depict how social movements communicate power. Robert D. Benford and Scott A. Hunt argued that "social movements can be described as dramas in which protagonists and antagonists compete to affect audiences' interpretations of power relations in a variety of domains". The people seeking power present their front stage self in order to captivate attention. However, the back stage self is still present, though undetectable. This is a competition of power, a prime example of dramaturgy.

A useful, and everyday way of understanding dramaturgy (specifically front stage and back stage) is to think of a waiter or waitress at a restaurant. Their main avenue of concern for him or her is "customer service". Even if a customer is rude, waiters and/or waitresses are expected to be polite ("the customer is always right") as part of their job responsibilities. That same waiter or waitress speaks differently when going out to her/his break room. s/he may complain, mimic and discuss with their fellow peers how irritating and rude the customer is. In this example, the waiter/waitress acts a certain way when dealing with customers and acts a completely different way when with her/his fellow employees.