

# Goffman's dramaturgical model of interaction essay



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In consideration of Goffman's Dramaturgical Model of Interaction explore its contribution to our understanding of social interaction. In order to help you explain this you should illustrate your work with practical examples from everyday life. Humans by nature, as suggested by Aronson, are a highly socialable species and care a lot about what others think of them. This has led to the existence of a belief in public appearance or the sub-conscious development of self presentation. This is the foundation for Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts" (William Shakespeare).

This essay hopes to explain social interaction, the development of social perception and how this has led to Goffman's dramaturgical analysis. In order to fully understand the concept behind Goffman's theory we must first look at interpersonal communication. Burton and Dibleby define this as "any form of communication (both verbal and nonverbal) between two or more people face to face. Forgas (1985) goes on to say that interpersonal communication relies to a certain extent on the shared social knowledge between the sender and receiver, that is messages usually only make sense within a given well-defined social environment. This helps to reinforce Goffman's argument that human interaction is dependent on external factors such as time, place and audience. He draws the theatrical metaphor from the way in which humans interact with each other based on cultural values, expectations and societal norms.

The idea behind dramaturgy is acknowledgement through deception, we as actors show what we think is expected from us and can easily manipulate

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the audience into false acceptance. We show ourselves as how we want to be viewed, a prime example of this is in a job interview, we act on what we think will get us the job; we bend the truth to make us the perfect employee when in reality we may be completely inappropriate. Social perception begins with the acknowledgement of self. It is a personal style and identity built up from intimate thoughts, attitudes, experiences and responses to situations. The self is a private matter only known, and not fully, by oneself through intrapersonal communication.

But it is also a public construct, a result of public performances and interactions with others. " (Burton and Dimpleby 2006). The self is the basis for the roles performed and without the acknowledgment and development of it, masks cannot be formed and confidence in ones performance is minimal. If control of communication is undermined it is nearly impossible to present a desired persona and to have the performance believed. It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... " (Robert Ezra Parks) The masks we wear and the roles we play are us seeking " to define the situation" (Burton and Dimpleby 2006) and control peoples responses to us. In western society the way in which people dress, style their hair and present themselves all give off carefully sculpted and planned signals and intended meanings.

Bankers wear suits to show professionalism, the higher quality the suit; the better they are at what they do. Surgeons wear physical masks for hygiene reasons but they also hide the person and give off the associated image of

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professionalism that helps reinforce trust between a doctor and patient therefore the costume reinforces the performance. Masks are a further advancement in Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor to illustrate the different roles required of us throughout life and the many relationships that are encountered.

Actors present themselves through attitudes, beliefs and individual personalities. The roles performed may have " consistency based on the personality and self-image of the person" (Burton and Dimbleby 2006). Despite this, different roles require different attributes and it is not uncommon to find that the performance is altered before each audience, for example in front of a superior at work, it is expected that there will be an air of professionalism and respect. This attitude would create an uncomfortable atmosphere among friends and family and so actors must be able to integrate their roles to fit in with circumstances and this may lead to certain masks being put up or taken off. Controlling performances both verbally and nonverbally can sway the audience into believing the actors view of a situation.

Goffman's concept of performance has two dimensions; for the most part the performance given is not one of deception but of truth and sincerity. " One finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act: he can be sincerely convinced that the impression of reality he stages is the real reality. (Goffman 1959) This leads the author to believe that this is true for most of society, for the way in which people present themselves through their beliefs, actions and demeanour is who they believe they are. Secondly

Goffman discusses the belief in a " cynical" performance in which an  
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individual has no faith in their performance and no concern with the inclination of the audience, the performance is based on deception. A prime example of this is the salesperson that convinces a consumer to buy a defective or below average product to increase his sales figures.

However in any performance given, cynical or not that actor never fully reveals themselves and has the choice to hide certain idiosyncrasies, thus allowing the audience to be given a desired impression. Nevertheless degrees of performance are not to be forgotten as different settings require individual responses. Structured roles such as those of an interview or employment demand a more staged performance than that of socialising with friends and family. Actors not only have the ability to exploit their manners and appearance as well as their communication channels for performances but can also manipulate their physical surroundings.

In drama, actors are pretending in front of a real audience, in reality " participants are both performers and audience. " (Burton and Dimbleby 2006) This concept has lead to Goffman's concept of front stage and back stage performances. The front stage refers to the public personification of the performance, it is the outward appearance and demeanour of an actor or the furniture in a desired setting. Front stage requires decorum, politeness and any attributes which are compatible with " an idealized version" (Goffman 1959) of oneself. In ontrast backstage is more relaxed and requires less formal norms of behaviour. A prime example of this contrast can be found in restaurants and other public sector industries, where on the shop floor employees are very aware of a front stage setting but as soon as they are away from the public they can relax and conform to their back stage

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persona. " However, while there is a tendency for a region to become identified as the front region or back region of a performance" (Goffman 1959) regions are interchangeable and are not exclusive.

An executive's office may act as a front region to other employees to show his success by the means of its furnishings. Yet this can also be considered as a backstage region for this is where he can relax when out of sight. When working as part of a team, presentation of self becomes a " united presentation of a social establishment. "(Burton and Dimpleby 2006) In order for the team to succeed they must work well together and co-operate their individual tasks to maintain a united front that gives off the desired impression.

If a single member fails to uphold the performance it can lead to embarrassment, confusion or the collapse of the performance. In order to protect the staged performance the team must have loyalty to all members and the ability to adapt to unforeseen circumstances in order to maintain the public performance. For example, a surgical team and the chief of surgery are expected to show a united front when dealing with patients and not undermine one another in dealing with diagnosis and treatment. Goffman's model of interaction illustrates the link between intrapersonal and interpersonal communication.

It shows that the two are intrinsically linked and for effective communication to occur it is important to have self confidence. To achieve this, it is important to have a clearly defined self image, be cognitively aware of verbal and nonverbal communication and be comfortable when performing

and presenting to an audience. "... The key to dramaturgical success is to control the audience's access to information, so that elements of performances that are given are such that they are given off" (Fine & Manning 2003: 46) As Goffman's dramaturgical model illustrates the performance offered by an individual is " put on... for the benefit of other people" but can be easily adapted when " looking at the individual's own belief in the impression of reality that he attempts to engender in those among whom he finds himself" (Goffman 1959). Furthermore consideration of the performer's settings must be taken into account. " Backstage conduct is one which allows minor acts which might easily be taken as symbolic of intimacy and disrespect for others present and for the region, while front stage conduct is one which disallows such potentially offensive behaviour. "(Goffman 1959).

Social situations provide a reference for the impression we want to manage. When at home few masks are worn and the performance is at its most natural, as this is the environment with fewest expectations and requires the least amount of acting, in stark contrast if on a first date or at a job interview more masks are worn. These are two of the most staged environments as expectations are high and certain attitudes and demeanours are kept hidden as they are seen as unbecoming.

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