Encyclopedia of Social Theory

Dramaturgy

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Book Title: Encyclopedia of Social Theory
Chapter Title: "Dramaturgy"
Pub. Date: 2005
Access Date: October 03, 2013
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.
City: Thousand Oaks
Print ISBN: 9780761926115
Online ISBN: 9781412952552
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952552.n83
Print pages: 211-214

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952552.n83
A *dramaturgical* approach, both in sociology and else-where, treats everyday behavior as a theatrical performance. Although a little too familiar, it is still worth recalling the soliloquy in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which we are instructed:

> All the world's a stage
> And all the men and women merely players;
> They have their exits and their entrances;
> And one man in his time plays many parts.

In fact, Shakespeare appears to have been so taken with the comparison between theater and life that he had a Latinate version of the first line inscribed above the entrance of The Globe Theatre (Evreinoff, in Brisett and Edgley 1990). Evreinoff also informs us that Erasmus of Rotterdam predated Shakespeare, having made much the same point about the beginning of the sixteenth century, when he asked rhetorically whether our lives are any more than performances in which we wear different masks. And no doubt others predate him. Among more recent playwrights, perhaps Luigi Pirendello deserves special mention for having pushed the comparisons between on- and off-stage performances about as far as they can coherently go in his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*.

In the social sciences, *dramaturgy* is strongly associated with the work of Erving Goffman, who developed the term in part as a general extension of symbolic interactionism and in part as a development of the dramatism approach pioneered by Kenneth Burke, in the 1940s. For Goffman, the application of a theatrical vocabulary to the social world was one way of exploring the symbolic interactionist framework associated with the ideas of George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer, and Everett Hughes, which he had encountered as a student at the University of Chicago, in the late 1940s and early 1950s. However, it is also apparent that Goffman's dramaturgy owes much to Burke's dramatist perspective, as he himself acknowledged.

Burke (1969) argued that there are five key dramatist terms: *the act, scene, agent, agency* (i.e., the instruments used by the agent), and *purpose*. He proposed that they could be combined to form a “grammar of motives.” The five terms can be combined in different ways, with different emphases and in the context of different empirical settings,

thus producing myriad transformative possibilities. By using his five key dramatist terms, Burke hoped that his simple model could be used to understand a wide variety of social situations. Burke was certainly ambitious, believing (unlike Goffman) that the use of theatrical concepts might enable us to grasp the motives people had for their actions.

Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis

Goffman outlined the principles of dramaturgy in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Insofar as the language of the theater is understood metaphorically, Goffman's analysis is based on four assumptions: that there is a transfer of meaning from one term to another, that the analysis is literally absurd, that it is nevertheless meant to be understood, and that it is self-consciously “as if” (Brown 1977:80–85). As long as these four assumptions are preserved, *The Presentation of Self* is not in danger of confusing a person with an actor or everyday life with the theater. However, precisely because Goffman is so persuasive, there is a tendency to take the analogy to be more revealing than it actually is.

In *The Presentation of Self*, Goffman developed themes that he had initially explored in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, *Communication Conduct in an Island Community* (1953). *The Presentation of Self* outlines six dramaturgical principles that can be used to redescribe everyday events as theatrical performances. They are the performance, the team, the region, discrepant roles, communication out of character, and impression management.

Goffman suggested that people, that is, “performers” and their various “audiences,” frequently believe that what is being staged is the “real reality.” This is easier to achieve if the performers' performances are “sincere” rather than **[p. 211 ↓]** “cynical,” that is, if the performers believe in the parts they play. Each person, Goffman reminds us, is etymologically a mask, and therefore a certain amount of theatricality is inevitable. Performances are bolstered by “fronts.” There are three kinds: “settings,” such as props; the “expressive equipment” of each performer, his or her clothing, age, speech patterns, and so on; and “manner,” the performer's style. These three components of a front are usually encountered together as part of a person's “routine.” They allow the

“dramatic realization” of the performance, which is also an “idealization” of it, as it puts the performance in the best possible light.

Goffman also suggested that “mystification” surrounds many performances. This describes the practices whereby audiences are kept at a distance in order to preserve the elements of each performance that might collapse under close scrutiny. For example, Goffman mentioned the advice given to the King of Norway; namely, that he should avoid familiarity with the “people” for fear that they find him a disappointment. For many performers, it seems, the only mystery is that there is no mystery, and thus their main dramaturgical problem is to prevent the audience from discovering this.

Performers rarely take to the stage alone, performing instead in a troupe that Goffman referred to as a “team.” Each team has the character of a secret society, both because the performers' fates are tied together in their joint performances and because each performer is privy to discrediting information about the other performances by other team members. Each team is organized by a director, who both allocates roles and serves as an informal party whip, disciplining unruly or dissatisfied team members.

Performances take place on-and offstage. Goffman (1959) distinguished between the front region, in which performers are fully aware that audiences are watching them, and back regions, in which front-stage performances are “knowingly contradicted” (p. 114) as a matter of course. A “guarded passageway” protects the back region by restricting physical and visual access from the front stage. Nevertheless, various people with “discrepant roles” find a way of gaining access to the team secrets hidden away back there. These people include informers, shills, spotters (who check up on performances to protect audiences), shoppers (members of other teams), service specialists (such as hairdressers), confidants, and colleagues (pp. 145–59). Goffman distinguished five kinds of secrets that backstage intruders try to discover: “dark secrets” that are incompatible with a team's image, “strategic secrets” about a team's plans, “inside secrets” about team membership, “entrusted secrets” that demonstrate trustworthiness within the team, and “free secrets” that do not discredit the team and hence are not protected.

The general concern of the actor in Goffman's dramaturgical world is “impression management.” This is an umbrella term to cover all the ways by which people attempt

to control what audiences know about them. It is jeopardized either by impressions that performers unwittingly "give off" or by "communication out of character." In addition to protecting individual and team performances, impression management also protects the general sense everyone has about what is taking place. To this extent, audiences and performers often work together to sustain a desired drama of social life, even after it becomes apparent that everything is a sham. For example, parents of ambitious but untalented musicians learn to listen sympathetically as each child gives ear-splitting public performances, and each child continues despite knowing that no impression management can cover up the missed notes and muddled score.

In *The Presentation of Self*, Goffman (1959) was careful to point out the limitations of the dramaturgical metaphor. Revising Shakespeare, he warned that "all the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify" (p. 78). And toward the end of the book, he cautioned that dramaturgy is merely a "rhetoric and a maneuver" and the resulting analyses should only be pursued with an "eye to taking them down" (p. 246). Dramaturgical analysis aims simply to uncover the various manipulations by which people alter their audiences' perceptions of them. Goffman offered no view about the morality of these manipulations, although he certainly implied that a wise member of the audience is able to "see through" the presentations of self by others and, to this extent, cannot be "taken in." Understood in this way, although without the specific concern for the preservation of political power, Goffman is a latter-day Machiavelli.

Much later in his career, Goffman returned to the questions of the limits of the dramaturgical metaphor. In the preface to *Frame Analysis* (1974), he reminds us again that all the world is not a stage: We need real parking lots, cloakrooms, insurance, and so on. He then tried to specify the ways in which the theatrical and everyday worlds are quite different. He began by rethinking the definition of the performance. He suggested that we should define the performer negatively, as the person who is granted special and exclusive permission by the audience to present a drama. This permission reveals the "frame" that defines the nature of the performance. Thus, to use one of Goffman's examples, when John Gielgud played the role of Prince Hamlet, this involved make-believe, whereas John Smith playing the role of father does not. Furthermore, Gielgud's personal identity remains separate from the characters he played, unlike Smith's. To keep these distinctions clear, Goffman reserved the term "role" for specialized

stage and nonstage functions, “person” for the possible subject of a biography, and “character” for the stage version of that biography. Thus, although Gielgud plays both the stage role of Hamlet and the nonstage role as actor, his biography is **[p. 212 ↓]** based only on the latter. Nevertheless, it is true to say that Gielgud's fictional portrayals of characters from Shakespeare do constitute a part of his own biography.

Goffman also explored the conceptual limits of the dramaturgical notion of a role. In the chapter on “Normal Appearances,” in *Relations in Public* (1971), he examined the implications of the fact that “self-enactment” cannot be part of the role of “acting natural” (pp. 268–77). Selfenactment occurs whenever people consciously try to play the part of themselves. The resulting performances are quite different from the well-rehearsed routines that are performed more or less effortlessly on other occasions. When self-enacting, people's performances soon appear, even to themselves, as something alien, false, and mere “show” (p. 270). Thus, people experience dramaturgical discomfort whenever they continue to play roles that are no longer appropriate. Changing circumstances requires new roles, otherwise people become aware of both the possible immorality of their performances and of the technical skills required to perform them. Self-enactment produces the anxiety-producing sense of being “on” and is different from the low-key casualness that is evident in much interaction (see Messinger et al. in Brissett and Edgley 1990). For example, teenagers may have little sense of self-enactment when talking with their friends but find themselves tonguetied when on dates.

In a development that threatened to overextend the dramaturgical metaphor, Goffman (1961) suggested that “role distance” is integral to role analysis. Role distance involves “disdainful attachment” (p. 98): It occurs whenever people separate themselves from the roles that they are presently performing. Thus, whatever sense of style we associate with a person is apparent though role distance, since everything else “belongs” to the role and not the person. To simplify one of Goffman's extended examples, much of what surgeons do during surgery is required of them by the professional role they play. However, what nurses, patients, and others think about individual surgeons is determined by the sense they have of each surgeon as a “character” who is more than the role of surgeon. This requires each surgeon to exude a personal style that Goffman claimed was nevertheless part and parcel of the professional role, since without it the

person-as-surgeon appears wooden and lifeless, and hence fails to perform the role in a satisfactory way.

Hochschild (1979) has pointed out that in analyzing roles, Goffman's comparison of on-and offstage acting assumes that there is only one model of acting in the theater, whereas in fact there are two competing schools. The “English School” focuses on outward demeanor and hence is compatible with Goffman's concern with everyday impression management. However, the “American or Stanislavsky School” favors “deep acting,” in which actors perform on the basis of personal memories that connect them to the parts they are performing. Hochschild's distinction points the way toward a more elaborate dramaturgical account of acting, in which the performance is not just a snapshot of impression management but also a rich narrative of the person that extends back and projects forward in time. Hochschild uses this distinction to show that the sociological study of emotions is compatible with dramaturgical analysis.

Throughout his work, Goffman considered dramaturgical action as a form of strategic interaction. Dramaturgy should therefore be understood as goal-directed, instrumental action. It is a general term for one of the ways by which, alone or in concert with others, people seek to bring about certain ends. This suggests that the metaphor of the theater is subservient to the metaphor of the game, since dramaturgical manipulation is understood by Goffman as one of the things people do get what they want. It is a “move” in the game of everyday social interaction. This is an argument that Goffman first aired in his dissertation and then explored at length in two books: *Encounters* (1961) and *Strategic Interaction* (1972). The latter book's title is, in fact, Goffman's suggestion for the successor to Blumer's term “symbolic interaction.” It weds Goffman's own work to the version of game theory associated with Thomas Schelling and others.

Since dramaturgy is a form of strategic interaction, ritualistic, normative behavior is nonstrategic, because it is pursued without extrinsic goals. Instead, normative behavior is a goal in its own right. This suggests that Goffman's over-all sociology may be profitably understood as consisting of two broad elements: the strategic and the normative (or the “ritualistic”). Whereas the former is goal directed, the latter is not. In strategic interaction, the person's aim is to achieve the advantage provided by a certain result. By contrast, a person who acts normatively understands adherence to the norm as an end in itself rather than as a way of advancing a cause.

Dramaturgical Analysis after Goffman

Dramaturgical analysis can either be extended empirically by using dramaturgical ideas in new settings or conceptually by extending new terms. Sociologists have made extensive use of dramaturgical ideas in a wide variety of studies concerning organizational, cultural, and political life (see Brissett and Edgley 1990 for a representative selection). Psychologists have been more interested in testing dramaturgical terms in experimental settings to establish their validity (see Leary and Kowalski 1990 for an overview). As mentioned earlier, Hochschild (1979) has attempted to advance the conceptual framework of dramaturgical analysis by connecting it to an emerging sociology of emotions. Harré (1979) has made extensive use of dramaturgy (and Goffman's work in general) in his ambitious reworking of the field of social psychology.

[p. 213 ↓]

Criticisms of Dramaturgical Analysis

There are four broad criticisms raised against dramaturgical analysis. The first is that the concepts are assembled in a disorganized way, with the result that no formal theory emerges. This is particularly frustrating for social scientists wishing to quantify and test hypotheses. As with much qualitative sociology, dramaturgy is suggestive but difficult to test. Since all metaphorical analysis is "literally absurd," it is reasonable to expect (as Goffman did) that the analysis will at some point break down, ideally in revealing ways. The second criticism is that dramaturgical findings are obvious and therefore trivial or that they are not obvious but trivial anyway. This puts dramaturgical analysts in a difficult position: If their findings ring true, they are dismissed as obvious, but if they ring false, they are simply wrong. A third criticism is that dramaturgical analysis uses an impoverished model of the self, seeing each of us as primarily shallow and manipulative. The source of dissatisfaction here is with the dramaturgical focus on the presentations of self rather than on the self who is doing the presenting. Critics (Glover 1988) have suggested that dramaturgical analysis needs to develop this "missing"

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theory of the self if it is to be a compelling contribution to sociological theory. A fourth criticism is that dramaturgy offers merely a photograph of social life when what is required is a fulllength feature film. This suggests a merger of sociological and historical approaches, as it argues for the expansion of dramaturgical analysis beyond the narrow confines of social situations established by Goffman. However, it would be wrong to overstate these criticisms. Since the concept of dramaturgy continues both to be useful in empirical research and the subject of lively conceptual debate, the future of dramaturgical analysis seems assured.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412952552.n83
See also

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