

Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of dramaturgical analysis, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Goffman's Dramaturgical Analysis and Presentation of Self
2. Front Stage and Back Stage

1. GOFFMAN'S DRAMATURGICAL ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF SELF

Society is a theater upon which people--social actors--act out themselves. Sociologist Erving Goffman wrote a hugely influential book in 1959 called *The Presentation of Self*, which is one of the most important sociological texts ever written, and it helped found the idea of symbolic interaction and the symbolic interaction perspective.



BRAINSTORM

To say that you 'present yourself', what does this imply to you? What do you think about when you hear the word presentation? What does it mean? What in life do you present?

Plays are presented to an audience. Speakers give presentations at conferences. Musicians present concerts to their audiences, and movies are even called feature presentations. Goffman theorized that social life is like a presentation or a play. He viewed society as a theater's stage upon which performers enact, or present, themselves.



THINK ABOUT IT

What do you find in a theater? Typically, you find a stage, a dressing room, and a back stage. You have an audience, and props, and all of these things combine to contribute to the presentation. Metaphorically, then, to call society a theater and a social stage upon which people enact their performances, is what Goffman called **dramaturgical analysis**, after a dramatic production.

This is an interesting way to look at society and social interaction. If you conceive of yourself as a performer, in the world putting on a performance for an audience, you might think that it implies a degree of contrivance or artificiality. Also, while you're presenting yourself, you might be concerned with impression management. This means that you are trying to control the way others perceive you, so you might slant or slightly alter your presentation of self in different contexts so that you are seen positively in the eyes of others.

IN CONTEXT

You learn to do this ‘performance’ at a very young age. You comprehend that there are certain ways you can act around your parents, and certain ways to act around your friends. There is yet a still different way to act when you’re at school, around your teachers in a classroom and around the principal. Overall, this process is called the **presentation of self**, which is a person's efforts to control their impressions in the eyes of others.



TERMS TO KNOW

Dramaturgical Analysis (Erving Goffman)

The idea that people's day-to-day lives can be understood as resembling performers in action on a theater stage.

Presentation of Self (Erving Goffman)

Phrase used to describe a person's efforts to create a specific impression in the minds of others.

2. FRONT STAGE AND BACK STAGE

Your impressions are given off primarily on the front stage. **Afront stage** is where a performance takes place, any time an audience is present, whereas a **back stage** refers to when there are performers present but the audience is not. When two or more people are present, there can really be no true back stage. Goffman theorized that people seamlessly move in and out of front stage and back stage in their social interactions.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are at home one morning preparing a presentation for work that day. You may be sitting at your desk in your pajamas, on your computer, with a cup of coffee. Later, though, you have to put on some nicer clothes, and you have to think about how you want to present your material. The interaction--your upcoming meeting--was already there in the back stage, but you had to think about a way to present it positively.

To illustrate the concept another way, think about the physical space of a restaurant. When you walk into a restaurant, you're walking into the front stage. You see tables, and waiters and waitresses in their uniforms (their ‘costumes’), and they're using a multitude of props. You're seated at your table that is set up a certain way.

However, there is also a chaotic back stage. If you have ever worked in a restaurant, then you know just how chaotic a restaurant kitchen can be. Most people, though, don't go back stage and experience that. For the cooks that are back stage, they are simultaneously on their own front stage because they're interacting with each other--developing their personalities and putting on performances--in the kitchen, which is your back stage. Their front stage is your back stage. As you can see, there are not always clear-cut distinctions between front stage and back stage.

Goffman maintained that people move in and out of front and back stage and their perspective adjusts

accordingly, whether you're a cook in the back stage or a dinner in the restaurant. People always want to get back stage if they can--it's an intriguing part of social life.



THINK ABOUT IT

Think about the following social situations through the lens of dramaturgical analysis:

- Why do people couch surf? People who are choosing to stay with strangers want to get back stage. They want to see an authentic backstage, where people are simply hanging out, when they're not putting on a performance, not contriving and putting on a display.
- In dating and relationships, why might you say you value your partner because you feel like you can really be yourself and be who you are? It's uncomfortable to have to try to put on some presentation of self all of the time, so a partner that lets you just feel 'back stage' all of the time is valued.
- If you had the opportunity to go back stage at a concert and meet the performers behind the scenes, would this be a 'back stage' experience for you? It might, for you, but for the performers, this would simply be a normal part of their social life, and therefore they would be engaged in front stage presentations of self when they meet you in the interaction--as would you, potentially--but it would be taking place in a back stage.



BIG IDEA

There are degrees of back stage and front stage, and people move through them, successively getting further back or further out front.



TERMS TO KNOW

Front Stage

In dramaturgical analysis, this is where a performance takes place in front of an audience.

Back Stage

In dramaturgical analysis, this is the social space where performers are present, but an audience is not.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about sociologist Erving **Goffman's concepts of dramaturgical analysis and presentation of self**, in addition to the ideas of **front stage** and **back stage**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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