

ONE

Self-Presentation and the Dramaturgical Perspective

Report: Today the Day They Find Out You're a Fraud

WASHINGTON—While experts agree you've been remarkably successful so far at keeping up the ruse that you're a capable, worthwhile individual, a new report out this week indicates that today is the day they finally figure out you're a complete and utter fraud. The report, compiled by the Pew Research Center, states that sometime within the next 24 hours, people will find out that you have no idea what you're doing, that you've been faking it for years, and that, through continuous lying and shameless posturing, you've actually managed to dupe virtually everyone around you into thinking you're something other than a weak and ineffectual person. They've had their suspicions all along, sources said, but today their suspicions will be confirmed. (The Onion, 2014)

Social relations are . . . organized more around the appearance than the content of things.

—Erving Goffman

Introduction: “Being Yourself” Is a Performance Too

There is a popular quote: “Fake people have an image to maintain. Real people don’t care.” Is that so? In this book, I ask you to reconsider some taken-for-granted beliefs. One belief is that people act genuinely most of the time and do not work consciously to manipulate what other individuals think about them. Our judgments of people are based on what we observe of people’s naturally occurring and unthinking actions. An alternate approach is to consider people as self-reflective and strategizing actors who work consciously to cultivate a desirable impression. Erving Goffman (1959, p. 70) wrote that people mistakenly interpret individual acts as “something not purposely put together at all . . . an unintentional product of the individual’s unselfconscious response to the facts of the situation.” That mistaken interpretation overlooks the value of examining how people work systematically to influence how audiences respond to them.

As an example, think about what the phrase “just act naturally” means. That phrase instructs someone to act more effectively to keep an audience from discerning that anything is off and disrupting the social situation. Ironically, the phrase acknowledges that people act by stressing that they should not appear to be acting. Many everyday social interactions involve pressure to do this kind of “acting naturally.” A person encounters someone that she dislikes, but she interacts pleasantly with her as if she harbors her no ill will and is pleased to see her. Her physical appearance, demeanor, and words reveal nothing untoward and offer up no indications that expose her true feelings. A man likes a woman he has known for a while and wants to ask her out on a date. He seeks to express his positive feelings but is a nervous wreck. His friends urge him to suppress his fear, be confident, and “act natural” when he speaks to her. He wants to share how he feels in an honest way but has to figure out what to do to express himself effectively.

In a nutshell, when we tell someone to act naturally, we tell him or her to do a better job managing the impressions that they are giving. Yet identifying “acting” as something that people do is conflated with the perception that people who act are insincere, deceptive, or fake. That conclusion throws the baby out with the bathwater because impression management can communicate more than just deceptions. That perception leads people to fear admitting when they put on a show or exercise strategic care to choose the right setting, appearance, or demeanor for an interaction.

This book examines the work people do to influence the impressions that others form about them. I examine steps involved in how people craft and enact the personas that they exhibit. A *persona* is a character, mask, or social role that people display in the theater to play a part, and in social life, as part of everyday activities. Readers know that people put forth images and work to fit into social roles, but how sociologists analyze those efforts may be less familiar. This book will introduce you to the concepts and ideas that sociologists refer to as dramaturgical work or impression management.

As a prelude to that explanation, pause and consider the priority people place on what others think of them and the stakes involved in influencing those impressions. Picture the intense introspective anxiety and self-conscious moments people have when they feel alone and isolated, burdened by a secret that they can't reveal for fear of embarrassment and being shamed. Consider the website *Postsecret*. Thousands of people mail in their deepest secrets, anonymously, on postcards they designed themselves to share with readers on this site. A common feature of these secrets, such as having hidden sexual desires, having strange preoccupations, or being victims or perpetrators of crimes, is that they constitute information that people must hide and not associate with their real names or they risk anger, condemnation, and disgrace.

These worries reflect people's investment in their social attachments. They are so concerned with how other people might react to them. How can we view these moments as so private, when other people's potential views keep us company in our minds? People fixate on their secret and run through internal monologues that simulate what other people might say and think if they knew and acknowledged that secret. These self-absorbed worries represent a victory of social bonds in causing people to obsess on their own time about their "fit" with the social groups that matter to them. The upshot is this: If individuals spend so much time thinking about the impressions they give, or could give to other people, we must acknowledge the serious mental exertions we put into viewing ourselves as impression managers, even when alone. People appraise themselves in the harsh light of whatever social expectations matter to them, and we are rarely off the clock.

When people fail to meet interpretations of how they ought to be, that shortfall embarrasses them. The ideals that people look to meet or surpass can be big or small, but the result of having them is that we may alter our behaviors and thoughts in front of people. Maybe someone

who is sensitive about having gained weight sucks in their stomach or never tucks in clothes. You have probably observed someone present a patently fake version of herself or himself, as opposed to a real one that doesn't serve her or him well in a given moment. For example, maybe a person talked about a girlfriend or boyfriend back home that doesn't exist or said that the one that exists doesn't. Hair gets bleached, resumes get embellished, false smiles appear on faces, and silent curses and insults are muttered out of a target's earshot. Maybe an online dating profile is only "sort of" accurate. Whatever we are in those moments, we are not just being "ourselves." We know the difference between what we really think and feel versus putting on a front for others.

Think about your self-consciousness analytically, especially readers who just graduated from high school or who have that time emblazoned in their memories. You had occasion to observe how hard teenagers work to receive social approval, and high school is far from the only place where people make those efforts. So how do people act to gain the favor of others—and not in terms of "being fake"—tactically? What actions do people take? How would you study them?

Please note again that such questions go against the popular idea that a person should "just be yourself," "not worry about what other people think," and "not let anyone change who you are." According to this mainstay cliché in movies, TV productions, and after-school specials, when protagonists stay true to themselves, significant others love them more (after some tribulations that wise them up), and mean conformists all get their comeuppances. While supportive and well intentioned, this suggestion overlooks a real issue: just how pragmatic telling someone to "be yourself" really is.

For example, some social situations require trading a degree of independence for a reward. Can you really tell irritating coworkers where they can go, let professors know that you'd rather binge watch something on Netflix than do the scintillating reading on historical taxation schemes, or inform mom and dad that they should just hand over the money and forget the advice? You can be yourself and say all those things, but you are unlikely to benefit from the experience. If this assessment of "being yourself" seems too cynical and harsh, think of the converse—how often do you really want other people to "just be themselves"? Are there at least a few people where the last thing you want is for them to act like themselves? Do you really not know anyone that you wish would stop expressing his or her political opinions, whatever they are? We teach

children to resist the urge to always be themselves, such as telling them not to ask strangers questions like “Why do you look like that?” We urge people in general to practice a behavior called “self-restraint.” Further, many people aspire to not “just” be themselves because they set their sights on becoming a “better” version of themselves—healthier, wealthier, or in a different relationship. Do people portray themselves as thinner, richer, more attractive, and successfully employed in online profiles than they are in their off-line lives?

If we are not being ourselves, then what kind of “selves” are we being? Erving Goffman, whose ideas I address in this book, argues that people perceive themselves as representing esteemed social attributes, roles, and values (Goffman, 1952). Goffman analyzed how people demonstrate having these attributes by examining people’s actions as if they were actors performing onstage for audiences. That analytic approach is referred to as the *dramaturgical perspective*, in reference to the term “dramaturgy.” Dramaturgy is a theatrical term that refers to how theatrical professionals called dramaturgs adapt and stage artistic and literary works to best communicate a work’s meanings to an audience. The dramaturgical perspective encourages adherents to investigate how people “stage” performances in real life. Sociologists who use a dramaturgical approach analyze *nonfiction performances*. Whereas fictional literature or performance is made up and uses imaginary characters in make-believe situations, works of nonfiction focus on actions that real people take. Nonfiction performance involves actions, communications, and intentions that audiences should interpret as “real,” that happen in real life and in real time.

People are expected to embody valued attributes when in front of people, or “onstage,” and they experience powerful social pressures to do so that impact their self-consciousness and affect how they interact with others. Parents tell children to be good boys and girls, and employers tell workers to act deferentially to clients. People want others to define them as possessing desirable traits, such as being “good” people, loving spouses, athletes giving 110%, or as being clean and sober. They want others to treat them as actually representing those statuses.

The idea of performing enters the picture in that people need to communicate that they demonstrate valued attributes. They must make them “easy to see,” decipherable, and legible to audiences. You “knowing” for yourself that you embody some characteristic alone does not mean that other people agree or know right away what impression you mean to give. People may not automatically get credit and consequent rewards for

representing a value, status, or trait without some demonstration beforehand to warrant that response. The social attributes that someone thinks he personifies must connect to the expectations that other people have for how someone with those traits appears. The person then must perform to those expectations adequately enough to demonstrate them convincingly. People need others to recognize their claims of identity—of who they are in the world—in order to be held to represent esteemed attributes.

To receive credit for being whatever “kind of” person first requires that the people around you have the competency and desire to interpret your behaviors correctly. Individuals should know and be able to perform some actions that characterize a trait that they want others to perceive them as representing. Second, the target audience should be able to interpret and respond to those actions accurately. For example, you can think of yourself as having a great sense of humor, but sustaining that belief is hard if no one ever laughs. Funny is not an objective fact but an interpretation that an audience decides subjectively. You view yourself as a leader, but do others follow your lead?

You can identify yourself in many ways, but external recognition of those labels as credible is vital. How many of us have seen episodes of *American Idol* type shows where a person who cannot sing labels himself or herself as a star in the making, with entertainment value built on audiences enjoying rejecting such ludicrous claims? Credibility comes from others accrediting labels as accurate through evaluating actions or because the actor has the power to compel people to agree. Processes of appraisal occur between performers and their audiences, and people can become upset when either side judges wrongly.

For example, people get angry when they feel that others do not “see through” individuals who receive credit for having a social status that they view as undeserved. “Why does everyone think he is so nice when he isn’t?”, “Why won’t she see that he is a cheater?”, or “Everyone thinks she is so smart, but she just gets other people to do all the work for her.” Sometimes the stakes are higher. Bernard Madoff was labeled a genius investor, a pillar of the community, and an esteemed member of the New York City investment world until he was exposed as an exploitative fraud that used a Ponzi scheme to steal people’s investments. The complicated question is why didn’t people see him for what he was?

That audiences must know how to interpret performances does not mean that audiences must agree with an actor’s hoped-for interpretations but rather that audiences must have the *basic interpretive competence* to

understand what an actor is doing in context. That competence involves a capacity to judge and the right background knowledge to make judgments accurately. I don't know how to appreciate the cultural messages of hipster clothing choices to know that someone hit the irony jackpot—I'm not a hipster. A person who knows the culture and slang of massive open online games will have a tough time having a detailed conversation about game strategy with someone who knows nothing about that culture. Similarly there is an expression, *know your audience*. Some audiences are not predisposed to react to your actions as you wish. Enacting the workplace fantasy of telling irritating people their flaws is not typically a good long-term career strategy.

The judgments that people make affect us. We dread negative social judgments, seek social approval, or wish to muddle through some interactions and situations without bother. Underlying how these varying judgments take place, and how people act, are social systems that organize all of that interactional traffic. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework provides conceptual tools to help us understand the encounters, face-to-face interactions, and nature of performances that people offer in all their diversity and patterns. Sociologists also investigate the agency that individuals and groups have to affect their circumstances and to fit into the social groups around them.

So Why Study Dramaturgy?

Familiarizing yourself with dramaturgical ideas offers you a greater purchase on and understanding of the nature and impacts of impression management in everyday life. First, whether people like it or not, *surface appearances matter in life*. People judge books by their covers, and the judgments that other people might make about you have some power over your thoughts and actions. The dramaturgical perspective provides insight into how surface appearances work and also how they may deceive. People create appearances, and people also are taken in by appearances. Examining self-presentation addresses the information that people communicate and should also remind people to think about whether some pertinent information is hidden. As we all know from various interactions, meaning comes not just from what people say but also from what people do not say. Further, individuals respond cognitively to the appearances of things, so when situations appear to connect

authentically to the expectations and frames that people have for them, people often accept them, rather than go through a lot of complex exploration of whether everything is as appears. Taking the opportunity to reawaken the possibilities that appearances can deceive can make someone a more astute analyst. Good analysts understand yet go beyond the surface appearances of things to avoid taking things for granted.

A second reason to learn the dramaturgical approach is because *impression management tactics are attempts to exercise influence and power* in everyday life. Analyzing self-presentation makes you more insightful about how people persuade others, and those techniques can be noted, documented, and considered. As an example, marketers and commercial organizations use techniques of persuasion in advertisements and in presenting their products. Understanding more about how such performances work is useful to consumers and also to readers with interests in those areas.

A third reason is that *individuals become more self-aware* by thinking through the lens this perspective offers. The term “self” is a cognitive structure that allows people to think about themselves in “the third person.” The self is reflective (Mead, 1934), meaning that people can think about themselves when they act and also reflect on who they seem to be in the eyes of other people. We have beliefs about others; we also have beliefs about ourselves called a self-concept (Leary, 1995, p. 159). The self communicates to others and to itself with presentational techniques. Thinking about impression management enables people to learn more about how their senses of self arise and stand out in interactions.

A fourth reason is to *learn more about the many social influences on how you and other people act*. People do not perform aimlessly. We all face going onto stages as rites of passage to accessing rewards in life, and we must perform well there, be they job interviews, dates, marriages, relations with coworkers, athletic fields, or in front of authority figures. We cast other people into roles as we walk down the street, and we recognize that many places comprise routine stages where we must act in certain ways, whether we feel like it or not. Society systematizes dramaturgical performances, a point discussed later as the *rationalization of dramaturgy*. People feel all kinds of pressure and obligations to perform in life; understanding why these pressures exist, what their purposes are, and what consequence they may have is worthwhile.

A fifth reason is that knowing more about the dramaturgical perspective *will add a new interdisciplinary approach to your skill set*. Anyone with

interests in social psychology should familiarize themselves with this perspective. Ongoing research using this approach sheds insight into the subjects of crime and punishment, marketing and organizations, popular culture, working life, and issues of race, gender, and upward mobility. This book will introduce some examples of approaching those research topics through a dramaturgical lens.

A sixth reason is that *dramaturgical theory is interesting and makes you a more reflective and thoughtful people-watcher*. If you have an iota of curiosity about what makes people tick and how they try to construct images for themselves and social groups that they belong to, then this book offers great food for thought.

Getting Down to Business

The phrase sociologists use to describe the work involved in manufacturing personas is called *impression management*. Impression management describes the actions actors take to encourage an audience to form a particular impression. To manufacture an effective social persona is the aim of the actor's impression management.

A sociological perspective requires examining how larger social forces, at the level of organizations, groups, and social institutions, influence what impressions people want to make. All kinds of prevailing social norms, roles, and structural arrangements can affect what content audiences expect to observe in a person's impression management. Agency and autonomy can exist in how people perform their roles, but social conventions already preexist that shape how people are instructed and judged to perform roles appropriately. These social conventions, in the factory of human conformity called socialization, are akin to how default settings organize the standard operations of machines. Just as machines are built to meet particular performance specifications, people's actions and personas are aimed at meeting preexisting basic, established social conventions in a culture. When people can predict what personas and impression management techniques are expected, and on what stages they should be performed, "factory specs" (or social defaults) for everyday situations are revealed and a baseline social order comes into being.

These "factory specs" illustrate some of the underlying structure that governs interactions and social situations. For example, people know how to use knives and forks or chopsticks to eat as appropriate in a given

culture or whether they should drive on the right or left side of the road. The decision to use one kind of utensil or another or to drive on one side of the road or another is not mandated by biology but by cultural expectations. People emerge from the conformity lessons of their childhoods ready to perform in accord to many basic factory specs in use within their cultures.

After providing background on dramaturgical ideas, attention will shift to exploring contemporary applications of impression management ideas. Subjects covered include examples from popular culture such as the adoration of celebrities, cosplay, reality TV, and professional wrestling; demeanor and emotional displays in workplaces and in getting a job; how dramaturgical ideas apply to contemporary commerce, such as in advertising and marketing; and how dramaturgical ideas help interpret Internet phenomena such as online dating, "catfishing," revenge porn, cell phone use, and stigma.

The remainder of this chapter will cover the provenance and some basic aspects of the dramaturgical perspective. Chapters 2 and 3 provide an overview of impression management in action and of how social contexts influence impression management. People base performances in preexisting social norms for behavior, for example, to meet required decorum and etiquette that people learn during socialization. Sometimes analysts apply a dramaturgical analysis in a superficial way to just dissect what individuals do without considering the contextual constraints and influences that are implicit in helping to determine how people act. Good analyses scrutinize what people do and consider how relevant social contexts and rules animate and motivate those behaviors. Analyzing everyday life in dramaturgical terms enhances the ability to analyze social rituals, exercises of social control, and other aspects of social life.

Acts that people perform repeatedly have cumulative implications beyond the sole individual instance in which someone does something. The next chapter considers the product of dramaturgical behaviors in not just responding to norms but helping to create and negotiate responses to norms. When sociologists can examine repeated sets of the same dramaturgical activities, they can reach some larger conclusions about how that behavior affects groups of people. For example, say that a person performs at a job interview as an interviewer or interviewee. You can identify what each person in the interaction does (studying performance techniques) and identify the context, stage, and expectations for the interview (say, social norms or arrangements around hiring or the social class of the

participants). Additionally, a product of job interviews, when examined across many cases, is that interviews constitute *auditions for opportunity* in which dramaturgical activities end up impacting social stratification in terms of getting or not getting a job. Conceived from a cumulative standpoint, new research questions emerge.

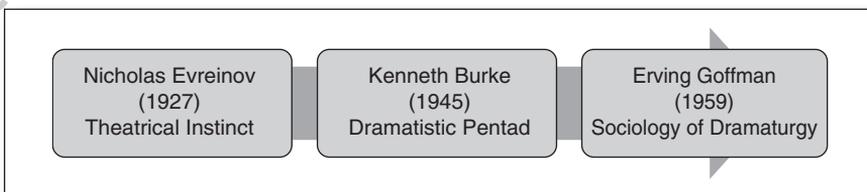
For example, how are people judged to interview well by various occupational standards? Are there advantages or disadvantages involving who people know, nepotism, money, or other resources that impact access to opportunity and people's likelihoods of auditioning successfully? Are interviews a good means to allocate opportunity in social life based on the skills that are required to succeed in them? A dramaturgical framework helps to structure such questions for analysis.

The analytic approach to dramaturgy in this chapter and the subsequent one addresses how to conceptualize people's impression management, understand the social contexts that affect those actions, and identify the cumulative products that result from repeated dramaturgical actions. These chapters provide a background for examining the contemporary applications of the dramaturgical approach presented later in the book. For handy reference, an appendix contains a glossary of the dramaturgical concepts discussed in this book.

The Scholarly Provenance of Dramaturgical Ideas

Nicolas Evreinov, a noted Russian playwright and polymath, was a key early thinker in examining theatricality in everyday life. His book *The Theater in Life* (1927) argued that a *theatrical instinct* of creativity, expression, and release exists as a comprehensive force in individual and social life. This impulse is manifest in how individuals transform images and

Figure 1.1 Important forebears in analyzing dramaturgy



sensations from outside them, through an internal creative process, into newer images that actors express outward. Evreinov illustrates this instinct using examples that range from rites in primitive societies to children's play, arguing that theatricality is important in providing means to make people's lives more fulfilling. In his words, "Without the zest of theatricality life would be to him like tasteless food. . . . As soon, however, as he begins to theatricalize, it acquires a new meaning, it becomes *his* life, something that *he* has created" (Evreinov, 1927, p. 27). Theatricality helps people to create and invigorate life anew through creating images.

Evreinov asserts that being human involves a deep, fulfilling impulse to interpret, express, and perform. This idea is vital to orient people to think about what performances might mean to people. The theatrical instinct and performances that result from them comprise a form of empowerment. The theatrical instinct offers a "gift of *imagining* things, of imitating reality with imagination, of beautifying his miserable life with his fantasy, that is to say, of theatricalizing" (Evreinov, 1927, p. 30). We will see this point reemerge in examining popular culture and commerce.

An example where Evreinov (1927, p. 34) shows the theatrical instinct in action is in the imaginative play of children. Children transform small objects into magical play objects all the time. The smallest object easily becomes something else during play. A pencil becomes a gun or a wand, a car becomes the Batmobile, a doll becomes a child, teddy bears on the bed become protectors. Consider also how prevalent fantasy is in children's lives. A child dreams of being a sports hero in moments of great drama or of casting spells as Harry Potter; all of which redirect individuals away from the mundane banality of everyday existence.

Modern versions of such play are intrinsic in adult activities like fantasy camps, LARPing, cosplay, and video games. A theatrical impulse to empower through using one's imagination is also an adult pursuit, and many adults are enticed to pursue this fulfillment by the siren call of the marketplace. Commercial organizations advantage themselves of the theatrical instinct in how they organize marketing and develop products for consumers. Many entertainment options today immerse people in imagination-engaging products that they consume through enactment. People are mostly all equals biologically before the screen showing them an entertainment product. Whatever their incomes, their eyes all can take in the visual escapist fare before them, transporting them into Hogwarts, or the world of Westeros and the Iron

Throne, or to observe a former high school chemistry teacher who deals methamphetamines, a young woman competing in hunger games, or the remnants of civilization surviving a world full of zombies. Later, I describe one dark interpretation of that immersion; the idea that today, consumption of popular entertainment is associated with decreasing opportunity to succeed in economic life and increased consumerism. Greater immersion in fantasy may connect to an increasing distance of people from real economic opportunity, which is a depressing argument to make, but one that some theorists advance. Evreinov's point is that reality fetters us, but our imagination can free us from shackles for brief interludes. In contemporary terms, if I can choose between battling alien soldiers using superpowers and weapons on an Xbox or confront less enthralling realities like my ennui, failings, duties, or dim prospects, then I will check out from disappointment as much as possible and, as some fear, perhaps not expend that energy to challenge my economic and social circumstances.

Evreinov encouraged people to think about the meaning the theatrical impulse has for people's inner lives. Consider how drunken people engage in impression management. Excess alcohol consumption can remove restraints on people who otherwise might shrink from acting as forcefully in social situations. As the quote about drinking goes, what is "on the sober person's mind comes out of the drunk's mouth." Too much alcohol makes some people reveal themselves in dramatic fashion as some individuals drink just for that release, to get a liquid license to act out a persona that is otherwise unavailable to them in sober life. Drink to excess, and one can become an avenger, a ladies man, unrepressed, a raconteur, everybody's friend, a daredevil, or a comedian.

There are also imagined lives that preoccupy people in dramas that run themselves in loops in their heads. Many people dream of taking on a finer female or male shape with bulging muscles or curves or a lack of them that suits their ambitions. They imagine what they would do if they only looked like a particular celebrity. They fantasize about being young again or rich or having a time machine to go back and not make some mistakes in an "If only I had . . ." kind of way. Or they seethe in repressed fury at some target while hatching fantasy plots in which they wreak a righteous vengeance upon their enemies, whomever or whatever these are. People with anxiety, for example, spend time imagining the worst-case scenario that could happen to them, a tendency Albert Ellis called "awfulizing," or alternatively "catastrophizing." As an example, just let

a hypochondriac diagnose their symptoms on the Internet! Other people lose themselves in thoughts of their deepest wish that someone in their life changes, becoming nicer or more successful or more attentive to them. How many dads or moms just know that their kid can be a professional athlete or performer before the child hits 10? People can spend a lot of time thinking about what they will do when the genie arrives to grant their wishes or when they win the lottery. What they do while they wait is occupy themselves in a theater in their minds.

This speaks to another sense Evreinov addressed, which is the idea of “theater of oneself,” in an impression management sense. There are those who view all things around them as just being part of an overall show that revolves around them. Everyone is fixated on talking, thinking about, and judging you. Of course, people are busy living their own lives and are perhaps less interested than narcissists think, about minute events in the narcissist’s life. For people who are “drama queens or kings,” they act as if all actions in the world are about them personally and that everyone around them should be held as a captive audience to their thralldom.

People also playact for pleasure and escapism, by acting in the world just to amuse themselves. Sometimes people lie to strangers, fake an identity or a biographical detail, for example, to a taxi driver in a conversation or when online. Paul Ekman (1985) coined the term *duping delight* to describe the pleasure people receive from manipulating others through deception. Practical jokes, for example, involve some minor escapist theatrical pleasure when people create an innocent appearing social scene in order to take victims off their guard.

The term *sign vehicle* describes aspects of setting, manner, and appearance that people use in performances. Some types of sign vehicles that Evreinov mentions are fashion and speech. Fashion illustrates people treating clothes akin to theatrical costuming. As Evreinov (1927, p. 58) points out, people fit on their clothes like they are costumes, making efforts to stretch, pull, cut, clean, embellish, match, accessorize, lengthen, shorten, contrast, adjust to fit them, and they also contort their bodies into strange positions before mirrors to appraise all angles and vantage points of perceiving how they appear in their costumes. Clothes must “make a statement.”

The theatricality of speech is also clear in how people put performances into their speech through word choice, intonation, accent, pronunciation, and pitch. “I’m f**king serious,” “I love you so much,” “That is sooo unbelievable,” “You are amazingly beautiful!” In speech,

there is emphasis, metaphor, hyperbole, and condemnation. I have heard numerous women describe something a man thinks or says, for example, by suddenly lowering their voice to a suitable caveman imitation and grunting out statements in an insulting depiction of men. People put on Southern accents in mocking ways. Kids make requests sweeter by using a “pretty please with sugar on top.” People pepper their speech with adverbs to add drama to their words.

Certainly this tendency exists in writing as performance medium. As an example, consider snarky reviews on websites like *TripAdvisor* or *Yelp*. In many comments, otherwise minor events become affronts condemned as outrages that produce vindictive written responses. I looked at some reviews for a hotel I like on *TripAdvisor* and found some illustrative gems. “There are coupons available for breakfast, but good luck at getting those. When I asked for one, they acted like I was asking for a blood transfusion on the spot!” “The carpet looks old and tired, and the towels are SHAMEFUL. . . . Not like the Clarion or the Marriott, the Hampton, or Hilton, with nice big soft plushy towels. I would advise bringing your own unless you like drying off with gray sandpaper.” Horrible is a descriptive word that often appears in such reviews, as in the service was “horrible.” Horrible is a strong word—maybe irritating or frustrating is better. Horrible is a word people use to describe serious negative events, like major economic downturns or even kinds of movies with monsters in them, but not minor travel inconveniences. Yet many reviews suggest that no inconvenience is minor and to suffer any is horrible.

Evreinov also thought theatricality was enacted on a more societal-level scale. He used the term *stage manager* to reference the more abstract idea that societies require regular performance management to create an orderly and organized societal life. He referred to processions of street sweeping, clean storefronts, and monuments, both public and private, landscaped mansions, and decorative front porches as examples, as well as social norms and values that govern performances. The stage manager concept is a placeholder idea or shorthand to describe a sense of public stage management, of organizations and institutions being in charge of directing the performances around us. People have even invoked theater as a means of government, with the term *theatrocracy* referring to the idea that governing bodies rule through using theatrical techniques to subdue a populace (Lyman & Scott, 1975). Evreinov offers useful ideas to think about what theatricality means in analyzing dramaturgy.

Analyzing Dramaturgy

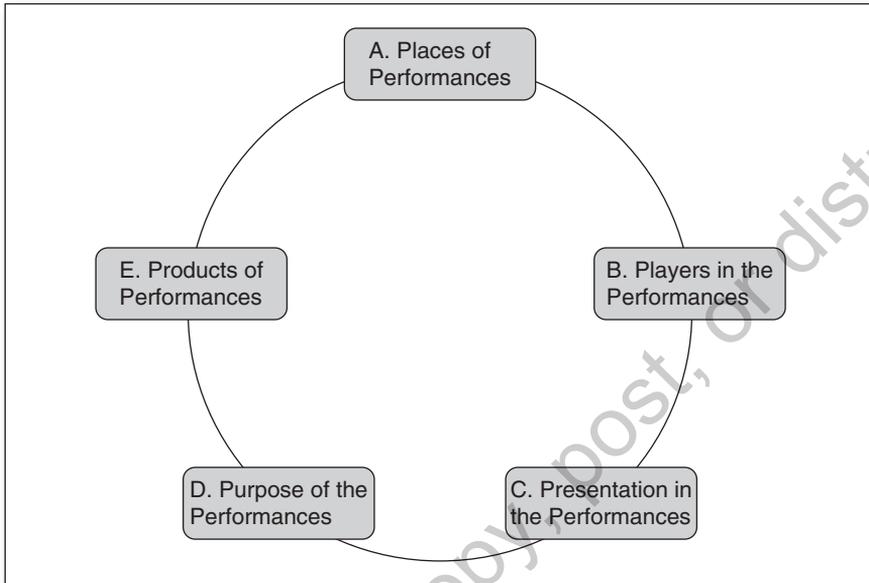
Evreinov's ideas also can partner with a proposed method for analyzing dramaturgical actions. Kenneth Burke (1945) developed the *dramatistic pentad* as an instrument for analyzing dramatic action. Narratives or stories, accounts, and talk, in fictional and nonfictional forms, are prominent vehicles for communicating dramatic action. In Burke's view, all of the above, as rhetoric, have five key elements to scrutinize. These elements of actions are the *act*, where people state what was done; the *scene*, in which people ask where and when actions were done; the *agent*, who engaged in the act; the *agency*, in which people examine how the act was done; and the *purpose*, in which people ask why people engaged in that action. The pentad provides a logical basis for examining activity by commencing with establishing what, who, where, when, and how. These questions, asked of any action, help explain the action. After these aspects of the pentad are determined, the next step involves examining the emphasis each aspect of the pentad is given compared to another aspect. Is one element the priority or dominant feature in the account?

This second step explores a ratio between the aspects, such as the ratio of act to scene in the account. One element in a pentad is more dominant than another. As an example, I am a fan of the television show *The Walking Dead*. The most important motive of action in *The Walking Dead* is the scene because the zombie-infested apocalyptic surrounding is the impetus for acts. An apocalyptic surrounding drives the action, the survivors, the means they have for carrying out acts, and the purpose of their activity. The pentad provides a basic schema for analyzing human drama. People can understand the "grammar of motives" of dramatic activity by stripping down that activity into constituent elements and then analyzing them comparatively.

We can adjust the pentad scheme to organize a more sociological analysis of dramaturgical actions. Figure 1.2 presents a variation on Burke's pentad as an example to guide the distinction of nonfictional dramaturgical actions into constituent parts for sociological analysis. The adjusted figure's purpose also identifies sequential questions to ask about observed dramaturgical scenes. The circle structure and alphabetical lettering indicate an investigative order.

Imagine a restaurant dining room, family dinner, or classroom meeting. Analyze the interactions occurring there in an ordered and systematic way. You can begin that examination by addressing the sequence of

Figure 1.2 Systematic Categories for Analyzing Nonfictional Dramaturgy



questions that this figure identifies, starting with (a) *places of performance*. These places refer to venues of people's performances that are comprised of the physical locations where people perform. Virtual stages are also places of performance. A setting "contains" interactions. Here we analyze where performances occur and how a given setting structures presentations, actors, purposes, and the products of performances. (b) *The players in the performances*. The focus here is on who and what engages in conscious or unconscious acts of communication. Who are the players? Players can include audiences, individual actors, teams of actors, and/or members of small groups held to represent institutions and organizations in interaction. (c) *The presentations that players give*. Here we identify the actions and expressions that players offer as constituting their performances. What nonverbal communications do the players offer? What do they say when they communicate with others? What are they doing? How and what are they performing? (d) Analysts must then establish what the *purposes in performances* are. Are people attempting to save face? Are people attempting to make others conform, are people trying to manage a stigma, maintain a company line, provide a service? Are they obeying etiquette or

expected rules of decorum? (e) Analyze *the products of performances*. What do you think are the consequences—intended and unintended—that occur cumulatively from the performances and the audience’s reactions to those performances? For example, in the case of job interviews, the cumulative successes of people who perform well are an economic product of dramaturgy. Examining that product is worthwhile. If there was no economic payoff from good interview performances, there would be no need for training schemes in how to interview well.

Erving Goffman and Dramaturgy

Evreinov presents ideas about the human meanings of theatricality in everyday life. Burke provides a guide for systematically exploring dramaturgical actions. Both contributions provide a background that enables deeper exploration of the dramaturgical perspective on social life. Erving Goffman, however, developed the lion’s share of analytic concepts in dramaturgical sociology.

Academics can focus more on reinterpreting a theorist’s ideas than on why the average person who does not read social theory for pleasure or work should care about those ideas. Erving Goffman, the theorist featured predominantly here, gave his books straightforward titles that signal their relevance for readers, like *Behavior in Public Places*, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, *Stigma*, and *Strategic Interaction*. These books conceptualize how people present information about themselves to influence the impressions audiences will have of them. Goffman studies the surface appearances that people create, the pressures that inform them, and how to conceptualize the interactions that comprise performances.

Let’s consider the subject matter implied in this content in an autobiographical way. Ask yourself the following questions: Do you plan in advance how to influence other people’s impression of you, like on a date, at parties with coworkers, or when meeting your significant other’s parents? Do you monitor what you say about a controversial topic in front of people? Do you wear distinct articles of clothing as “props” to give a good impression of yourself? Do you try to ferret out gossip while keeping some secrets under wraps? Do you practice presentations in private before you give them in public? Do you follow rules of behavior in public that you do not follow in private? For example, do you spend more time nude in public or at home? Conversely, have you ever taken advantage

of the anonymity that public spaces offer to act in ways that you would not want your family and friends to know? Do any organizational memberships that you have imply particular things about the kind of person that you are? For example, do men and women try to embody the values of brotherhood or sisterhood associated with a particular fraternity or sorority?

The dramaturgical perspective offers insights into performing one's identity. The key point to remember is that impressions are not just expressions that reflect natural processes. People produce impressions as concerted and social actions, and organizations encourage people to take on certain roles. Yet people do not always analyze the work involved in creating and sustaining such performances. The dramaturgical approach centers on analyzing how people manage these impressions, some mundane, some not, as the focus of study.

Goffman's Six Principles of Impression Management

Goffman identifies six principles in considering *impression management*.

- *People are performers who use impression management to convey a persona or sense of who they are to others.*

To illustrate this idea, Erving Goffman (1959) provides a long excerpt from a novel by William Sansom, *A Contest of Ladies*, in which the author takes us into the calculating mind of the vacationing Mr. Preedy, who is exceedingly self-conscious about giving off and displaying physical expressions and varying personas as he vacations on a beach:

He took care to avoid catching anyone's eye. First of all, he had to make it clear to those potential companions of his holiday that they were of no concern to him whatsoever. He stared through them, round them, over them—eyes lost in space. The beach might have been empty. If by chance a ball was thrown his way, he looked surprised; then let a smile of amusement lighten his face (Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to see that there were people on the beach, tossed it back with a smile to himself and not a smile at the people, and then resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey of space. But it was time to institute a little parade, the parade of the Ideal

Preedy. By devious handlings he gave any who wanted to look a chance to see the title of his book—a Spanish translation of Homer, classic thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too—and then gathered together his beach-wrap and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile (Methodical and Sensible Preedy), rose slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame (Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all). The marriage of Preedy and the sea! There were alternative rituals. The first involved the stroll that turns into a run and a dive straight into the water, thereafter smoothing into a strong splashless crawl towards the horizon. But of course not really to the horizon. Quite suddenly he would turn on to his back and thrash great white splashes with his legs, somehow thus showing that he could have swum further had he wanted to, and then would stand up a quarter out of water for all to see who it was. The alternative course was simpler, it avoided the cold-water shock and it avoided the risk of appearing too high-spirited. The point was to appear to be so used to the sea, the Mediterranean, and this particular beach, that one might as well be in the sea as out of it. It involved a slow stroll down and into the edge of the water—not even noticing his toes were wet, land and water all the same to him—with his eyes up at the sky gravely surveying portents, invisible to others, of the weather (Local Fisherman Preedy). (p. 5)

The quote illustrates the nonverbal actions that Preedy takes that he thinks will produce particular appraisals of him as a result. Goffman (1959, p. 6) wrote, “When an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation, which they come to have.” He notes that individuals may act in a “calculating manner” just to manipulate reactions or they may act unthinkingly. He further comments that audiences may interpret a performance accurately or not understand and reach conclusions other than the ones that the performer aims for them to have. There are *calculated impressions*, which are impressions that a person seeks to make as a result of her or his performance, versus *secondary impressions*, which are the impressions left in the minds of an audience, and that may or may not include the calculated ones that the performer sought (see Leary, 1995, p. 11).

Goffman (1959, p. 6) clarifies that what matters is “in so far as the others act as if the individual had conveyed a particular impression, we may take a functional or pragmatic view and say that the individual has ‘effectively’ projected a given definition of the situation and ‘effectively’ fostered the understanding that a given state of affairs obtains.” Audiences interpret and understand performances as meaningful communications that define

situations and what a “given state of affairs” is, which provides insight into how to treat people in that particular situation.

- *People perform in different social spaces referred to as regions of performance.*

For the most part, people perform in the *front stage* region, where they are “onstage” in front of an audience. Front stages are where actors expect to give performances and audiences expect to appraise them. People prepare those performances in the *backstage* region, which is any area where actors take a break from a persona that they have been performing and/or is where they are rehearsing and preparing for a future front stage performance.

A person may give a great impression in front of a date. While out of view and earshot of that date, they might use a mirror in the bathroom to touch up their appearance. Maybe they will talk to themselves about how to act and what to say when they return. What different adjectives do they hope to embody, such as charming, beautiful, fun, a good listener, and so forth? What strategies and actions will they use to try to get those impressions to take hold in others?

A front stage is where performances occur, but that is only a starting point. The terms front and backstage have a conceptual basis and comprise more than physical locations where people perform or practice. A front and backstage in the sociological sense reference situations where people anticipate meaningful social judgments to be ongoing about expected performances. Consider in daily life how often just being watched alters behavior, as people change their naturally occurring actions, because they worry about other people judging them. Research methodologists refer to this problem as *reactivity*, and this issue is an intrinsic component in dramaturgy. If your boss is watching you, you feel on front stage. When your office door is closed, you have a backstage where you feel freer to surf the web or text someone. People often try to transition from the front stage to the back. A simple move to do so is by closing a door or asking someone to shut the door. If you want a quick example of a signal in conversation where a front stage switches to a backstage, just think of moments at work when a coworker approaches your office to talk, and the first thing he or she says is, “Do you mind if I shut the door?” An open door can make a front stage and closing the door can make a backstage.

The composition of an audience also defines front and backstages. Suppose, for example, that you have a wild sex life, but “pass” as a humdrum type to coworkers, other students, and family members. Knowing

that particular people may observe you in particular situations impacts your approach to your own behaviors and determines whether you are on the front or backstage. If in front of individuals who know and share your secret wild side, you may be able to relax (backstage). In front of people who are not wise to your secret, you may perform to fit whatever actions you think characterize a staid person.

A person, and to a lesser degree a place, for example, may determine when a situation is a backstage or a front stage for the person. Before people who share your fraternal or sorority membership, you also may be on front stage, because you do not want your brothers or sisters to know that you keep your affiliation secret from employers or professors. Unlike the front stage being in one physical location for performances in actual theaters, front and backstages are fluid and variable in social life.

Goffman (1959) describes many examples of people conducting impression management on the front stage while acting differently backstage. He famously quoted George Orwell's observation of a dining room in *Down and Out in Paris and London*:

I remember our assistant maître d'hotel, a fiery Italian, pausing at the dining room door to address an apprentice who had broken a bottle of wine. Shaking his fist above his head he yelled (luckily the door was more or less soundproof): *Tu me fais chier*. Do you call yourself a waiter, you young bastard? You a waiter! You're not fit to scrub floors in the brothel your mother came from. *Macquereau!* Words failing him he turned to the door, and as he opened it he farted loudly, a favourite Italian insult. Then he entered the dining room and sailed across it dish in hand, graceful as a swan. Ten seconds later he was bowing reverently to a customer. And you could not help thinking, as you saw him bow and smile, with that benign smile of the trained waiter, that the customer was put to shame by having such an aristocrat to serve him. (p. 123)

Backstage, an enraged assistant maitre d' yells insults at an apprentice. Once front stage, the same person transforms into a polished, refined but servile "aristocrat." Workplaces typically have identifiable front and backstages, such as being out with customers or back in the office. Have you needed to provide service "with a smile" that required a front stage performance that you did not feel like giving? Have you seen anyone relegate anger at a customer to swearing backstage, while they remained polite on the front stage?

- *People work in teams and collectively to express the characteristics of social situations.*

So far many examples provided involved individuals acting alone. Yet most dramaturgical events involve individual actors who perform together as a team. *Performance teams* refer to individuals working together as a team to create and sustain performances for one another and for an audience. Athletic teams demonstrate team spirit through various ritual chants and huddles. Family members will act as a team to conceal secrets from outsiders by relying on other family members to act as if nothing is wrong and to backstop an acceptable story (Goleman, 1996). Maybe family members will say that someone is having a procedure done or visiting relatives when he or she has committed himself or herself to a psychiatric hospital. Workplaces expect coordinated activity by employees to conduct their jobs and serve the organization's interest. Disney World, for example, supports actors playing characters interacting together in order to sustain a marketed fantasy image for guests visiting their parks. Disney employees even refer to themselves as cast members. Many workplace groups, from White House cabinets to local businesses, rely on employees to camouflage disagreement privately and to agree to appear to support whatever the "party line" is publicly.

Individuals must coordinate actions with others to define social situations. Defining a situation means more than just knowing what the "state of affairs is"; defining a situation allows people to understand what they should do in that situation. People must share a common interpretation of what a situation requires from each person, so that together they can act as a team to produce a recognized and ordered situation.

For example, if a teacher and students meet in class, then they may implicitly agree to accord their behaviors to the prevailing definition of what is expected in that situation. Students and a teacher will then perform typical actions that comprise a class meeting. For most situations of this kind, a teacher stands in front of a screen or a blackboard orating, while students listen in silence, appear to or do pay attention, and write notes. If students are actually not doing any of the above, they may hide their lack of interest or their texting to avoid publicly disrupting the class "situation" and being confronted. A class that is out of control has participants who ignore these niceties, and the definition of the situation changes. When students are polite enough to camouflage inattention, they allow the defined "show" of the class situation to continue. As students, you may have witnessed such collusion. There is the game of making sure to look up at the teacher occasionally to nod as if you follow, while one's mind is otherwise occupied. The teacher, while assuming a persona appropriate to describing whatever information is

on tap, will also sometimes pretend not to see a distracted student or two nodding off or hiding their texting.

In a doctor's office, patients stay in a waiting room until a nurse or physician assistant beckons them to a small room behind the reception desk. Patients are ushered into examination rooms, which usually have an examination table covered with the same crunchy white wax paper. The medical assistant collects information and takes some small measures of bodily functions, like one's temperature and blood pressure readings. Patients are then told to wait and that "the doctor will be right with you." The staff choreographs patient actions to make them reactive. The staff does the same things over and over each visit to make the ordered situation of the doctor's visit possible. The receptionist and medical assistant constitute a team that maintains the routine social situation of the medical visit by corralling patients and heightening efficiency on the doctor's behalf. The visit is not a moment of social improvisation. It is a predetermined situation in which people know and are told collectively how to act.

- *People prioritize giving credible performances.*

As described previously, the goal of impression management is to embody a persona credibly. To give convincing performances means taking steps to appear authentic. I refer to tactics that people use to build up credible performances as *authentication practices* (Shulman, 2007). In the past, I described these tactics as steps that people take to create believable deceptions and to pass off lies as the truth. Yet people use authentication practices in more circumstances than just to make lies appear believable. People use authentication practices to also reinforce that a performance is credible and honest even when they are *already* being honest, particularly when they tell the truth in circumstances where people are suspicious of them. Credibility is the key goal in those performances. To persist in affiliations with social groups, people must appear credible to garner trust, maintain social order, and receive desirable responses from audiences. Even when people do tell the truth, they have to worry about appearing believable. Credibility is a dramaturgical must.

- *People avoid communicating "out of character" and taking any actions that could contradict the requirements of a performance and spoil it.*

People should stay in character when they perform. As an example, I have had a few students e-mail me stating that they were too sick to attend class. If they call me instead, they usually cough and hack on the

phone from the “flu” that keeps them from attending my fascinating class. I have then sometimes seen those same students running around outside with their friends on the campus quad or working out at the gym, definitely not appearing sick.

Professional wrestling promoters used to make wrestlers act in real life according to the storylines of their characters. If a villain and hero were feuding, they had to appear to detest each other at all times, including when traveling across the country to shows, in front of reporters and after matches. A bad guy had to taunt fans, and a good guy had to smile and be friendly. In a famous incident, wrestlers “Hacksaw” Jim Duggan, who draped an American flag on his back and took a 2-by-4 to the ring, and the Iron Sheik from Iran, who carried an Iranian flag with him, were supposedly bitter enemies involved in a feud. Then the police pulled them over when they were driving together after a show and found hard drugs and marijuana in the car. Both were fired immediately for drug use but also for exposing their actual friendship and communicating out of character with their storylines. American patriots and Iranian tough guys just don’t drink and get high together when fighting each other for the honor of their respective nations.

- *When people produce “spoiled” performances or someone spoils their performances, they try to repair any damage by engaging in curative steps.*

Goffman described many cases where people had a “spoiled identity” that they needed to repair. Think about occasions when you observe people apologize or give excuses to get out of trouble. “I’m not myself today.” “I’m cranky because I haven’t been sleeping well.” If someone acts stupidly at a party, he or she may explain that they were drinking too much.

A classic example from popular culture is when a person who is involved romantically with someone is caught with a different person and says, “This isn’t what it looks like” in an attempt to avoid trouble. Sometimes people anticipate having a performance spoiled, so they issue disclaimers in advance to avoid negative judgments.

As another example, stand-up comedians are paid to make people laugh. Sometimes they confront audience members who heckle them by interrupting them and insulting them during their acts. A successful heckler breaks up the comedian’s rhythm and tries to steal away the audience. Good comedians thus have put-downs ready to use on hecklers to preserve their legitimacy and avoid spoiling their identity as the comedy professionals. They may respond quickly with a line like “It’s alright,

I remember the first time I had a beer” and “Do I go where you work and tell you to flip the burgers faster?”

Erving Goffman described *defensive practices* as efforts that people make to defend their claims of having a particular identity or persona. When stand-up comedians shut down any hecklers who disrupt them, they use defensive practices to prevent their identity from being spoiled. People use *protective practices* when they try to help another individual or team sustain the integrity of a persona that they perform. An example is when someone’s child does not meet the criteria of being a great athlete. Parents then offer up a parade of reasons to “unspoil” the youth’s identity as a gifted athlete by telling the child that he or she was just “unlucky” in that game or that the coach is wrong not to play him or her because he or she is better than the other players who get more playing time. Students that have worked as counselors at sports camps have told me that when they rate the skills of campers who are not that good at a sport, they soft-pedal criticisms to preserve the child’s identity. They may write comments like “good heart,” which is a laudable trait, but not an athletic skill like how good your fastball is or how well you shoot free throws.

Defensive and protective practices help people sustain reputations. Think of public relations professionals whose jobs involve rehabilitating the public standing of infamous celebrities. How do you convince people to vote Barry Bonds or Roger Clemens into the Baseball Hall of Fame after steroid use tainted their athletic identities? When one’s repute is at stake, personally or professionally, people employ defensive and protective practices. You need only look at past political elections, or any election cycle really, to observe myriad political consultants suggesting defensive and protective practices on behalf of their clients while trying to stigmatize their political opponents. Scholars of impression management describe the use of *attributive tactics* versus *repudiative tactics* (Leary, 1995, p. 17). Actors use attributive tactics to express something about themselves, while they use repudiative tactics to disassociate themselves from unwelcome attributions.

To sum up Goffman’s six principles of impression management: (1) people perform; (2) specific regions of performance exist in the front and backstage; (3) people often perform as teams; (4) performing credibly is a key priority; (5) people try to avoid communicating out of character to maintain effective performances; (6) if a performance is spoiled, people attempt to repair the damage. More complex aspects of each dimension exist to explore later. For now, these basic points offer an orientation to key conceptual aspects of dramaturgy that Goffman articulated. Additional

concepts are introduced through discussion of recent research. For now, these basics should establish a footing into the dramaturgical approach.

The Self

Goffman states presentation of self in the book's title. What is the "self" that people are busy presenting? A self is not a specific thing that some set of psychological reports and studies capture, nor is it equivalent to a person's physical body (Hewitt & Shulman, 2011). Individuals can perceive themselves in the third person, as objects out there in the world about which other people have opinions. Thus, the self is a key object in people's thinking about their behaviors. The ability to imagine ourselves as a collection of characteristics that other people judge helps guide our conduct. People also have a socially derived sense of self as we use the input from other people's judgments to help determine what to think of ourselves.

Because human beings can consider themselves as objects in the third person, they can take potential reactions to their actions into account and estimate how actions they take will reflect on them. That is, if they can imagine themselves acting in a particular way, they can then imagine how others will act toward them based on what they do. This knowledge helps people consider how alternative ways of acting would affect themselves and others. That consideration involves a projective extension of self, in terms of hypothesizing, "Doing X will lead people to think particular things about me."

G. H. Mead (1934) used the personal pronouns "I" and "Me" to describe a process whereby people create and recreate a sense of self from social feedback. Individuals have a sense of self that incorporates the views of other people about who the person is and what he or she is like—those attitudes are the "Me" that others see. The "I" is the sense of self that wants to act in advance of receiving those attitudes—the "I" is the sense of self before the attitudes of others impact the "Me." The "Me" arises as people grasp the meanings that their own acts will have on how others interpret them. The "Me" is always situated, which means that a "Me" arises in specific situations, or in terms of dramaturgy, as a result of specific impression management and performance. The key aspect of this process, and vital to the symbolic interactionist approach, is that the experience of self rests on the capacity to see ourselves from the vantage point of others. The individual human being acts as a subject and is also

an object of thought in his or her own experience. Our actions and identity are self-referential, which in turn means that we develop a sense of self from taking in, integrating, and reflecting on the views that others have of us.

People pursue a sense of security and social identity by integrating themselves into group life. Individuals also want to attach a positive value to the self, to regard themselves favorably, and to maintain and enhance their self-esteem. The self is an important focus of social conduct. From this vantage point, projecting a desirable identity is a social process and not just a naturally occurring and unconscious behavior. So a first aspect to consider about performing onstage is that people care about what audiences think of them. That concern extends beyond people who we know well or who have some power over us, even to when an audience is composed of strangers. Psychologist Mark Leary asked why people care about looking good in front of strangers and others who have no relationship or a negligible one with them (see Leary, 1995, p. 42). Why care that much whether people who we don't know hear a fart or see that food spilled on a shirt, or that everyone (who we may not know) is "looking at us"?

Leary answered that people are so conditioned on a routine basis to connect performing and being judged with how they feel about themselves that they experience lower self-esteem whenever they look bad, even in front of strangers, or people that don't figure in that person's daily life (Leary, 1995). If people feel bad about themselves just from having an off appearance in front of an inconsequential audience, then judgments in general, both from strangers and from consequential observers, really do impact us. The reverse also holds. Do people mind receiving compliments, even from people who are inconsequential in their lives? The impact such reactions have on an individual's self-esteem makes the quality of impression management a priority all the time.

Individuals have a *dramaturgical* self and a *psychological* self (Schwalbe, 2013, p. 77). Performing a self to an audience is a social act that is external to the person's imagination. People can think of themselves over time in their own minds as an "invariant self"; that is, they see themselves as the same "psychological" person with a bundle of characteristics who goes through different interactions and events in his or her life. That invariant person represents a more psychological sense of self. Our interest here is to examine how individuals perform situational selves where they try to come across to others as certain kinds of people in certain kinds of situations, roles, and statuses. This self that is presented to others is a dramaturgical self. Who a person is to herself or himself as a continuous

psychological self over time is a different question to explore. How people perform a persona in a given situation to others is the aspect of self examined here.

Hare and Blumberg (1988) note that a “self is in effect a personal role.” People switch between selves in their own minds. A fictional example that Hare and Blumberg use to make this point is Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. One self is kind and gentle while the other is aggressive and nasty. In our own minds, we can chide ourselves for being a certain kind of person or thinking some particular thoughts, like “Why am I so (nervous, mean, worried, grumpy) today?” Sometimes those personal roles we play to ourselves spill out into public observation. Have you ever heard a person remark that someone you both know has “changed”? A woman may complain that her boyfriend acts differently when his male friends are around than he does in their absence. Who the self in effect is, at a particular time, is a situational role that a person plays. A psychological sense of self is more continuous and biographical and runs through all kinds of different encounters that people have. A dramaturgical sense of self is much more situational in nature. People can have the same worries over time that remain backstage, so anxiety can be a feature of a psychological self and emerge across situational roles, but for now, we focus on what happens in performances, as opposed to what people think of themselves in periods of solitary introspection.

Good sociological thinking analyzes the social conditions under which individuals act and that constrain their actions. The social feedback that people receive affects their self-esteem. People also consciously associate their sense of self with some images to bask in reflected glory and detach themselves from others to cut off reflected failure (Leary, 1995, p. 27). One such presentational strategy is when people associate themselves with hometown celebrities or successful sports clubs or talk about how their kid went to Harvard. An example of people cutting off their sense of self from a troublesome association is when some Americans clarify that, yes, they are Americans, but did not vote for Bush, or in the current era, that they do not support Obama.

Symbolic Interactionism

Psychologists often are interested in how inner motives explain the presentations that people make. While acknowledging these influences, we must also look to identify how social forces can affect presentations. How

people behave in final form is influenced by a combination of individual factors and social forces. Focusing on the social forces side requires asking under what extant conditions people make decisions and take actions. That emphasis investigates research topics such as how certain social contexts, circumstances, and settings tip the balance in how people act and feel. How do different social backgrounds influence people's outcomes? How do larger social processes, such as local cultural preferences, lie behind and affect what otherwise appears to be random individual decisions that people make? For example, research shows that the willingness to accept a gift can connect to local cultural influences on people (Watts, 2012). In some cultures, people accept a gift because they want to accept the gesture or because they are acquisitive. In other cultures, people reject some gifts because they want to avoid reciprocity, meaning they don't want to accept an obligation to owe the gift-giver a favor later, as to them gifts are not "free." To explore how individuals present themselves to other people, we must learn more about how social forces can pull people's presentational strings as if they were marionettes.

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological approach to understanding human behavior that provides theoretical propositions that support the dramaturgical perspective. Symbolic interactionist thinkers supply conceptions of the *self*, *role*, *symbols*, and *definitions of the situation* that clarify dramaturgical interactions between actors and audiences and connect social acts to larger scale patterns of behaviors across groups of people and in organizations. The connection between individual interactions and patterns of human behavior is an important concern for sociologists.

Individual acts are just the tip of the analytic iceberg of larger, more complex, and socially coordinated activities that apply to multiple people. Shaking hands, for example, means more than two persons extending their hands to each other. Shaking hands is a normative and socially coordinated activity where past experience and established social conventions matter. A handshake to seal a deal ("shake on it") is different from the message people convey when they shake hands in a situation instead of hugging to express formality. There are correct and incorrect handshakes (firm versus weak) and secret handshakes for private groups. To only assess the individual's part of an action (two people shook hands) without considering the more extensive social ramifications of acts explains far less about the social implications and meanings than exist in that action. In America, a bow might be a casual gesture that an entertainer makes after he or she performs a song. In Japan, bowing is considered a

complex and socially meaningful performance with incredible nuances in how straight the back is in the bow, how someone looks, and the level of respect that a particular kind of bow implies. Proper bowing in Japan takes experience living in that society and is a more complex socially coordinated activity than can be captured by just stating that someone bowed.

Individual actions do not emerge out of thin air. People know and anticipate social meanings for the acts that they select across a repertoire of available acts (when they have a choice). They know common interpretations for actions; they choose an action and then they act. To sociologists, the potential interpretations and reactions to our activities push our individual actions out the door, not primary biological impulses. This sequence is not always so. For example, fight or flight is real, and people will flee danger because of an inherited instinct to survive and not become someone's dinner. Yet social agents can train people to overcome running away in terror by training social interpretations into them to stay and fight dangers.

Like other sociologists, symbolic interactionists emphasize the impacts that cultural norms have on human behavior. People are born into an already existing society and culture and directed right into a flow of how to act. Other people define actions, objects, and obligations for us as part of socialization. People do not always follow those instructions to the letter, but they do form part of a repertoire of responses that people can have to social influences. Sometimes patterns of how to act are unchanging, and other times people innovate new behaviors. The key point is that people do not act or perform in a social vacuum; they respond in common to social context. How?

According to symbolic interactionists, a "significant symbol is a vocal or other kind of gesture that arouses in the one using it the same response as it arouses in those to whom it is directed." Because people can use significant symbols, we can interact with one another on the basis of shared meanings. How we respond to one another depends on our negotiated and shared interpretations of symbols. Think of how people read one another in social interaction. We anticipate how other people can act based on what symbols they manifest. Language is a phenomenal social accomplishment. People can understand what words mean in unison and know that they create similar reactions and responses between people. The predictability that language offers is vital as we can usually depend on people responding to words in common. Thus, the word *hello* should get nearly the same response from you as from other people.

People's capacity to use symbols allows them insight into how other people will respond to their actions. If they use a symbol in a particular way, they will receive a specific reaction. The knowledge that meaning is captured in symbols allows people to be strategic planners of interaction and to be conscious of us as other actors out there.

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