

DRAMATURGY

Dramaturgy is a sociological perspective commonly used in micro-sociological accounts of social interaction in everyday life. The term was first adapted into sociology from the theatre by* **Erving Goffman**, who developed most of the related terminology and ideas in his 1956 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Sociologist **Erving Goffman** developed the concept of Dramaturgy, the idea that life is like a never-ending play in which people are actors. **Goffman** believed that when we are born, we are thrust onto a stage called everyday life, and that our socialization consists of learning how to play our assigned roles from other people. We enact our roles in the company of others, who are in turn enacting their roles in interaction with us. He believed that whatever we do, we are playing out some role on the stage of life.

Goffman distinguished between front stages and back stages. During our everyday life, we spend most of our lives on the front stage, where we get to deliver our lines and perform. A wedding is a front stage. A classroom lectern is a front stage. A dinner table can be a front stage. Almost any place where we act in front of others is a front stage. Sometimes we are allowed to retreat to the back stages of life. In these private areas, we don't have to act. We can be our real selves. We can also practice and prepare for our return to the front stage.

Impression Management

Goffman coined the term Impression Management to refer to our desire to manipulate others' impressions of us on the front stage. According to **Goffman**, we use various mechanisms, called Sign Vehicles, to present ourselves to others. The most commonly employed sign vehicles are the following:

Social setting

The social setting is the physical place where interaction occurs. It could be a doctor's examination room, a hallway, someone's home, or a professor's office. How we arrange our

spaces, and what we put in them, conveys a lot of information about us. A person who lives in a huge home with security guards, attack dogs, and motion detectors conveys the message that he or she is very important, wealthy, and powerful, and probably that uninvited visitors should stay away. On the other hand, the owner of a house with no fence, lots of lights, and a welcome mat would seem much more inviting but perhaps not as rich or powerful.

How we decorate our settings, or what Props we use, also gives clues to how we want people to think of us. A businesswoman with a photo of her family on her desk communicates that things outside of work are important in her life. When a professor displays her degrees and certificates on the wall of her office, she communicates that she wants to be viewed as a credible authority in her chosen field. When people decorate offices, hang pictures in clinics, or display artwork in their homes, they are using props to convey information about how they want others to see them.

Appearance

Our appearance also speaks volumes about us. People's first impressions are based almost exclusively on appearance.

Clothing

The clothing we wear tells others whether we are rich or poor, whether we take care of ourselves, whether we have a job, and whether we take it seriously. Props such as a wedding band, a doctor's stethoscope, or a briefcase tell others even more about us.

Physical Stature

American society is obsessed with thinness, especially for women, and people often equate thinness with attractiveness. People commonly make assumptions about a person's personality and character based solely on his or her weight. The tendency to assume that a physically attractive person also possesses other good qualities is called the Halo Effect. For example, thin and attractive people are assumed to be smarter, funnier, and more self-controlled, honest, and efficient than their less thin and attractive peers. Conversely, we tend to think that heavier people lack self-discipline and are more disorganized than their thinner counterparts.

Stereotypes

Many of the assumptions we make about people based on physical characteristics are actually stereotypes. A Stereotype is an assumption we make about a person or group that is usually based on incomplete or inaccurate information. An individual or two may indeed fit a stereotype, but the danger is assuming that all people who share a particular characteristic are inherently the same.

Manner of Interacting

According to **Goffman**, our manner of interacting is also a sign vehicle. Our Manner Of Interacting consists of the attitudes we convey in an attempt to get others to form certain impressions about us. One of the most common ways to convey attitudes is through nonverbal communication, the ways we have of communicating that do not use spoken words. These consist of gestures, facial expressions, and body language.

Gestures

In our society, we often shake hands when we meet someone for the first time. The offer to shake hands signals that we want to meet the other individual, so when one person extends his or her right hand and the other person does not do likewise, the second person is insulting the first. Messages in gestures can be more subtle, as well. A person whose handshake is firm conveys confidence, but an individual with an intentionally crushing handshake is, in effect, claiming strength and domination over the other person.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions also convey information. Humans can convey a surprising amount of information in a look or an expression: a smile, frown, grimace, raised eyebrows, and narrowed eyes all convey distinctly different messages.

Body Language

Our body language can also convey a wealth of meaning. Body language consists of the ways in which we use our bodies consciously and unconsciously to communicate. Most people are familiar with the body language that accompanies traditional mating rituals in our society. Sometimes body language gives clearer indications of a person's thoughts or feelings than words do. For example, if a person claims not to be upset by a recent romantic breakup but his

or her movements and facial expressions lack their usual animation and energy, the individual's body language is contradicting his or her stated emotions.

Personal Space

The way we command space is also a function of how we choose to present ourselves. Personal Space refers to the area immediately around the body that a person can claim as his or her own. Like so many aspects of culture, the amount of personal space an individual claims differs from culture to culture. In general, residents of the West stand at least three or four feet away from the people they are speaking to. In parts of the Middle East, people tend to stand only about two feet away when conversing.

In general, the more intimate we are with a person, the closer we allow him or her to stand to us.

1–2 feet: Close friends, lovers, and family members

2–4 feet: Acquaintances and coworkers

4–12 feet: Formal acquaintances, such as a potential employer during a job interview

When someone stands closer than the culture deems appropriate, discomfort results because that person has invaded the accepted personal space. Powerful and prestigious people can command more personal space and in general are also more likely to invade others' personal space.