



## Reading 1.2

# The Dramaturgical Model

Wood, J. T. (2004). *Communication theories in action: An introduction* (3rd ed., pp. 118–122). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

### **The Dramaturgical Model**

Goffman is the person most associated with what has become known as the **dramaturgical model** of social interaction. As the name suggests, this model likens ordinary social interaction to theatrical performance. Thus, the setting, or context, of interaction is viewed as a stage. The people who are acting are actors; those who watch are the audience. The roles people (or actors) take in interaction are performances strategically crafted to project particular images to others, the audience. Within a drama are a number of specific scenes, each of which must be managed correctly for the overall drama to be successful.

Goffman (1974) also wrote about **frames**, which are models we rely on to make sense of experience. Building on Mead's symbolic interaction theory, Goffman theorized that we rely on frames to define situations for ourselves and others. We learn many frames through interaction with the generalized other, or society as a whole. Thus, members of a society or a

social community share many common frames for interaction. Despite differences that arise from personal experience and membership in diverse social communities, most Americans share a basic frame for interactions such as first date, wedding, applying for a job, funeral, and so forth.

Because frames typically reflect cultural knowledge, they vary from culture to culture. For instance, most members of a specific culture share an understanding of the frame for classes: we know the range of behaviors that are normal for teachers and students. In the United States, students are often rewarded for being assertive and participative in classes. In other countries, such as China, students understand their role as more deferential and less participative. To a large extent, the frames we use to define situations are shaped by our membership in particular cultures and social communities.

## Reflection

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*What connections do you notice between Goffman's ideas and vocabulary and those of Kenneth Burke?*

Using his dramaturgical model, Goffman studied how people present themselves and their activities to others. His theory describes how people shape others' impressions of them as well as how people convince others to adopt certain, and not other, definitions of a situation. What can a person do and not do to sustain a particular image? For example, what does a teacher do to project her- or himself as knowledgeable and interested in students? What can a teacher not do if she or he wants to convince students of this image? What do students do to convince teachers that they are engaged in learning? What might students do that would invalidate this image of them in the eyes of teachers?

**TRY IT OUT** Describe a first date using Goffman's dramaturgical model.

1. What impression do you want to project to your date?
2. What definition of the situation (the first date) do you want your date to accept?
3. How do you manage your dress, gestures, and words to project that impression of yourself?
4. How do you control the setting (or stage) to support the image of yourself and the situation that you want to project to your date?
5. What can you *not* do if you want to sustain the desired impression of yourself?

## Impression Management

As hinted at in the foregoing paragraphs, Goffman was especially interested in **impression management**, which is the process of managing setting,

words, nonverbal communication, and dress in an effort to create a particular image of individuals and situations. According to Goffman (1959), our efforts to create and project certain impressions may be either highly calculated or unintentional. Goffman also noted that sometimes an individual may be highly strategic in crafting an image but unaware that he or she is creating an impression.

## Reflection

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*Is it unethical or harmful to engage in impression management?*

On first learning about impression management, many people think it is manipulative and deceitful. Of course, it can be deceptive and unethical. Goffman (1959) realized this and cautioned against managing impressions in ways that are harmful to others. However, impression management can also be highly constructive because it allows us and others to behave in socially appropriate and beneficial ways. If you doubt this, think for a moment about what would happen if all of us acted exactly as we wanted without any regard for others' feelings. Social life would be impossible without the ordinary courtesy and politeness that most of us extend to others by engaging in impression management.

Goffman argued that all of us manage the impressions we create. We are sometimes more effective than at other times in convincing others to accept the impressions of us that we desire, but we're always managing how we come across. Think about all of the ways you manage your impression in everyday life:

- Some women remove hair from legs, underarms, and other parts of their bodies.
- People dress differently when at work, on dates, and relaxing with friends.
- You might drink from a carton of juice if you are alone in your home but not if you are visiting the family of your girlfriend or boyfriend.
- You might confess doubts about your career skills to a close friend but not to a job interviewer.
- In a class that you find boring, you periodically look up at the professor and write in your notebook to give the impression you are taking notes.
- In front of a young child, you curb what you say to avoid harsh language or curse words.
- While you are in the checkout line in a grocery store, the clerk asks, "How are you today?" and you resist giving an honest response, which would be "I have a bad cold, I didn't sleep last night, I have two exams tomorrow and I feel like —— !"

In each of these instances, you manage the impression you project in an effort to achieve certain goals, including persuading others not to perceive you as odd or obnoxious. As we interact with others, we adopt roles

and present ourselves as specific characters. Not drinking juice from a carton when others are present is an effort to establish the character of a mannerly person. Shaving legs and underarms may be an effort to establish oneself as a conventionally feminine character. Managing your actions to seem attentive in class helps you establish your character as a serious student. Choosing not to impose your frustrations on the clerk is a way of creating the impression that you are polite and socially competent.

Dramaturgy doesn't necessarily require us to assume that people are aware that they are performing roles, managing impressions, and so forth. The theory views life as a theater, but does not claim that people/actors are conscious of being on stage or of creating performances (Messinger, Sampson, & Towne, 1962).

### **Front Stage/Back Stage**

We've already noted that Goffman regarded the setting of social interaction as a stage. Yet he went farther to distinguish between **front stage** and **back stage**. The front stage is what is visible to an audience, whereas the back stage includes all that is not visible to an audience. The back stage is where actors can act in ways that might undermine their front stage performances. When you attend a dramatic presentation, you see the actors performing on stage. What you don't see is all that is happening backstage to make the frontstage performances believable. You don't see grips working on scenery, lighting, and other physical aspects of the set. You don't see actors rehearsing lines and gestures. You don't see directors guiding how the actors perform. You also don't see an actor who is playing a religious leader cursing at stage hands, and you don't see an actor who is playing a mean-hearted character cuddling a child.

Just as in the theater, everyday life occurs on both front stage and back stage. To illustrate this, Goffman used the example of servers who work in a restaurant. Frontstage behavior in a restaurant involves being polite and attentive to diners, showing concern for quality of food, and ensuring sanitation. Backstage behavior, however, may include servers dropping food on the floor, picking it up, and putting it on a plate to be served to a diner on front stage. On the back stage, servers may sample diners' meals, remove mold from a wedge of cheese before putting it on a plate to be presented to a diner, or ridicule customers.

To fully appreciate how social interaction works as drama, we must recognize both the front stage and the back stage of the theater. Backstage behavior allows people to vent feelings safely so that they don't interfere with frontstage performances. Backstage behaviors may also enhance solidarity among members of a group (servers in a restaurant, for instance) and allow them to plan effective frontstage presentation. Competent commu-

nicators know how to keep backstage behaviors out of view of the audience so they don't invalidate the frontstage performance. If a diner sees a server nibbling food from a customer's plate, the server is no longer credible in his or her frontstage role. Conversely, knowing there is a back stage where we can let our hair down and relax helps us tolerate the sometimes stressful frontstage work we do.

**TRY IT OUT**

Identify one role you perform in everyday life, the audience of your performance, and the frame for that role. For example, you might focus on being a good student (role) in the perceptions of a professor (audience) within the classroom or an office conference with your professor (frame). List the frontstage and backstage behaviors you engage in within that role. Also predict what would happen if your backstage behaviors were observed by your audience.

<b>Frontstage Behaviors</b>	<b>Backstage Behaviors</b>	<b>Predictions</b>
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

In our discussion we have focused on Erving Goffman's work so that you could understand it in some depth. However, dramaturgical theory and research is not the sole province of Goffman or even of sociology. Scholars in a range of fields embrace the dramaturgical model and use it to guide their work. As we will see in our critical assessment, that fact is sometimes perceived as indicating that the theory lacks intellectual coherence.