

## Sociology 3308: Sociology of Emotions

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### Lecture 27: The Dramaturgical Approach

Today we will explore the dramaturgical approach to emotion, a perspective that uses the metaphor of the theatre to examine emotional expression, performances, and tactical displays. We will begin by briefly reviewing the work of Erving Goffman, the originator of the dramaturgical perspective, who, though he only deals with emotion incidentally, has inspired many later writers in this field. We will follow with a consideration of the work of Louis Zurcher, who has conducted studies of the staging of emotion in organized activities such as college football games and military reserve exercises.

#### **Erving Goffman: The Presentation of Self:**

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

-William Shakespeare: As you Like it

The major exponent of the dramaturgical approach, and perhaps the most famous Canadian social theorist, has been Erving Goffman. While studying at the University of Chicago, he encountered Herbert Blumer, among others, and was exposed to the influential ideas of George Herbert Mead. He is well-known for his contributions to the study of total institutions such as mental hospitals, his work on stigma, and his ideas on the "dramatization of evil" which contributed not only to the study of deviance, but to the labelling perspective in particular.

Today, however, we will largely focus on Goffman's main contribution to symbolic interactionist theory, an approach that has come to be known as *dramaturgical sociology*. Derived partly from the ideas of philosopher Kenneth Burke, his central premise that *when human beings interact, each desires to manage the impressions the others receive of him/her*. Using the metaphor of the theatrical performance, Goffman thus argues that when an individual appears before others, he or she will have many motives for trying to control the impressions they receive of the situation. *In effect, each puts on a "show" for the others*. Interactants, either by themselves, or in "teams," give "performances" during which they enact "parts" or "routines." They make use of a "setting" and "props," as well as move back and forth between the "front region" of the "scene" and the "back stage" (hidden from the audience).

According to Goffman, the outcome of each performance is an *imputation* by the audience of a particular kind of *self* to the performed character(s). This *imputation* of self is *as much or more* a product of the expressive, ritualistic, or ceremonial elements in the actor's behavior as of the

substantive, practical, or instrumental elements. As he points out "*information about the individual helps to define the situation*, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him." In such circumstances, *it is to the individual's advantage to present him/herself in ways that will best serve his/her ends*. Control is achieved largely by portraying oneself in a manner that influences the *definition of the situation*, thus leading others to act *voluntarily* in accordance with one's own plan. Taking a pragmatic perspective, Goffman asserts that in any case where other individuals act "as if" the individual had conveyed a particular impression, he or she has *effectively projected* a given definition of the situation and the understanding that the imputed state of affairs implies. In Goffman's analysis, then, *the self becomes an object about which the actor wishes to foster an impression*.

Different aspects of this general theme, first developed in his 1959 classic The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, are found throughout his other works. These include the following:

1. Human beings strive to interact with others in ways that maintain both their own "face" and that of other interactants;
2. Deference represents the conveyance of regard and respect, and demeanour provides the means through which the actor creates an image of him/herself for others;
3. The social function of embarrassment resides in the demonstration that the face-losing actor is at least disturbed by it and may prove more worthy another time;
4. Misinvolvements (i.e. ways in which an actor may lose his/her involvement in a conversational encounter) violate the social requirement that interactants must elicit and sustain spontaneous involvement in a shared focus of attention;
5. Symptoms of mental illness may well be seen as a failure to conform to the tacit rules of decorum and demeanor that regulate interpersonal "occasions";
6. Actors, like gamblers, knowingly take avoidable risks, which represent special opportunities to establish and maintain face;
7. "Role distance" is the discrepancy between the actor's role prescriptions and role performance.

Goffman's work shares some similarities with other schools of thought in symbolic interactionism. For example, like the Chicago school, dramaturgy traditionally emphasizes sympathetic introspection as its chosen methodological orientation, and rejects the conventional assumption that social roles determine the behavior of Interactants in a simple cause and effect manner. Stressing the calculative and situational behavior of actors, both approaches remind us that norms, positions, and roles are simply the *frameworks* within which human interaction occurs. However, like the ethnomethodologists, Goffman recognizes that many significant norms tend to escape notice, because they are taken for granted. Hence, he stresses instances in which norms are violated in order to disclose what they are and how they are maintained.

Goffman's predecessors in the symbolic interactionist perspective (e.g. Mead, Dewey, Cooley, Thomas, Blumer, and others) gave no extensive consideration to impression management, insincerity, hypocrisy, or inauthentic self-presentations. Indeed, his work rivetted reader's attention to the human capacity for self-reflectivity in a much more compelling fashion than his predecessors. His analysis advances, in effect, a significant reconstruction of the image of human

beings offered in symbolic interactionism.

However, Goffman's approach has been criticized on theoretical, methodological, and ideological grounds. For example, with regard to the first two, Meltzer, Petras and Reynolds argue that his work contains:

"...no explicit theory, but a plausible and loosely-organized frame of reference; little interest in explanatory schemes, but masterful descriptive analysis; virtually no accumulated evidence, but illuminating allusions, impressions, anecdotes, and illustrations; few formulations of empirically testable propositions, but innumerable provocative insights. In addition, we find an insufficiency of qualifications and reservations, so that the limits of generalization are not indicated."

Others, such as Collins and Makowsky, question Goffman's notion of the functional necessity of "performances" in the maintenance of social order given the increasing informality of modern interpersonal relationships and the erosion of rank in contemporary American society.

Blumer criticizes Goffman on the basis that he focuses on the "narrowly constructed area" of face to face association "with a corresponding exclusion of the vast mass of human activity falling outside of such association." In Blumer's view, this is coupled within Goffman's study of face to face association to the study of personal positioning at the cost of ignoring what the people are *doing*. Essentially, Blumer is arguing that the dramaturgical approach theoretically ignores the macrocosm within which its micro-level concerns are imbedded. Similarly, it overlooks the actual *substantive content* of human encounters in its concern exclusively with the expressive forms of encounters. According to Blumer, the resultant image of the human condition is a truncated, partial one.

Similarly, Bob Prus asserts that the dramaturgical perspective Goffman presents suffers from its inattentiveness to the ways in which the *task or accomplishment aspects of action* are conducted on a day to day, moment to moment basis. Once one moves beyond a consideration of the ways in which impression management ("looking good") is achieved in interpersonal contexts, Goffman's work is of limited value in appreciating how human activity is achieved in practice. According to Prus, "to understand how one manages or performs tasks, builds relationships, acquires perspectives, and the like, one must turn more squarely to the symbolic interaction of Herbert Blumer and studies that have been developed in Chicago-style ethnography."

Moving beyond matters of theoretical and methodological scope, many also go on to criticize Goffman on more ideological grounds. Gouldner, for example, emphasizes how modern men and women frequently depend on, and are integrated into with large-scale bureaucratic organizations over which they can have little influence; individuals whose sense of worth and control is impaired, and who thus bend their efforts to the management of impressions that will maintain or enhance status. Gouldner thus characterizes Goffman's dramaturgy as "a revealing symptom of

the latest phase in the long-term tension between the middle-class's orientation to morality and its concern with utility." So constrained, with their faith in either seriously undermined, the new middle class endeavours to "fix its perspective in aesthetic standards, in the appearance of things."

Indeed, to many commentators, Goffman's scheme of imagery suggests a sordid, disenchanting view of humans and their society, one marked by both duplicity and despair. Such commentators contend that Goffman's view celebrates both the subordination of reality to appearance and morality to opportunism. Some terms that have been used include the human being as "an a-moral merchant of morality", or a "detached, rational impression manager." Cuzzort simply calls Goffman's conception "humanity as the big con."

Summing up, then, Goffman's dramaturgical approach, with its emphasis on self-presentation and impression management, has made a major impact in a direction that had only been hinted at before. Nevertheless, it has also been criticized as too narrowly-focused theoretically and methodologically, and as presenting an unflattering picture of human nature.

### **Louis Zurcher: The Staging of Emotion**

One writer in the study of emotion that has been heavily influenced by Goffman is Louis Zurcher. Yet Zurcher focuses not so much on the "presentation of self" as he does on how emotional performances are "scripted" in interactions. As such, he pays a great deal of attention to how interactants, either by themselves, or in "teams," give "performances" during which they enact "parts" or "routines." They make use of a "setting" and "props," as well as move back and forth between the "front region" of the "scene" and the "back stage," etc.

Zurcher most basically argues that "dramaturgically considered, emotion, or more accurately the performance of emotion, is enacted by the individual in terms of his or her understanding of appropriate emotional behaviors in a particular situation." The enactments of different emotional states, while the actors are occupying a particular role or a re experiencing a particular event, are not simultaneously undertaken. The situation often calls for a series of versatile emotional presentations, sometimes in a programmed order. A specific social situation, depending on how people perceive their place in it, can evoke a remarkable variety of emotional performances."

The work that we'll be discussing today involves Zurcher's analyses of two organized events: (1) a college football game; and (2) a military reserve exercise. Without getting too much into the descriptive detail of each of these pieces, I want to elaborate a bit on how each of these are illustrative of the dramaturgical approach to emotion generally.

#### **(i) The Staging of Emotion at a Football Game**

In the first piece, Zurcher reports the results of a participant observation study of the emotional performances of fans, coaches and players at a college football game. He describes the structure of the staging for emotional display, as well as the phasing of people into sets of contextually

appropriate performances. This phasing is seen to evolve from expectation for emotional experience, to diffuse emotional readiness, and finally to specific emotional displays. The staging and phasing are shown to be directed by cue-producing others (e.g. coaches, cheerleaders), and events which evoke rapidly shifting emotional expressions.

Zurcher's paper essentially records his observations (as a "visiting coach") of the staging of emotion during the final game of the season between two college football teams. This was a big game for both teams, as it was both a championship game, and a game after which both coaches were to retire. Zurcher's analysis is divided temporally into his observations on the staging of emotion by various parties in relation to settings, props, cues, and the like before the game, during the game, halftime, the end of the game, and after the game. It involved settings such as the field, the locker room, etc. A wide variety of emotions from the athletes, from quiet determination in the locker room before the game, acting pumped up on the field as it was to begin, elation as it finished with a victory, sadness upon the coach saying goodbye, etc., were all enacted in response to situational cues. Similarly, the cheerleaders pumped up the crowd, while the crowd responded differently to the coach emerging after the game in his old training jacket.

Zurcher feels that any adequate theory of human emotion should attend thus to the situation which shapes emotional experience and expression. The activities and events associated with a college football game were illustrative of the manner in which sets of emotions can be staged in social collectivities. People can experience a range of emotions in those situations, the extent and intensity of the range being cued by others. Though cue-produced sets of emotions are present in spontaneous everyday life situations, individuals often attend specially structured events in which they can expect to experience a particular set of emotions (e.g. weddings, funerals, religious services). Indeed, people routinely pay for admission to staged events in which they are directed to display a range of emotions (e.g. plays, movies, sports events, etc.)

The orchestration of emotions in staged events follows a scripted phasing, beginning with the arousal of expectations for an emotional experience. The expectations generate a diffuse emotional state, which is finally directed into a series of discrete and identifiable emotional displays. Among the football fans, the phasing was manifest first in their expectations for an exciting game, then in their expression of spirit, and finally in their emotional reactions during the game. They were directed in these performances primarily by the media, by formal and informal prompters, and by interactions with other fans. Among the football players, the phasing was manifest first in their expectations for a challenging game, then in their expression of mood, and finally in their emotional displays during and after the game. They were directed in these performances primarily by coaches, fans, and by interactions among themselves.

The dramaturgical nature of sets of emotions in such contrived events is typified by remarkable shifts in emotional display within a short time frame - e.g. the fans expressing happiness after one play, anger after the next, anxiousness after the next; the players in the locker room expressing joy, then sadness, then joy again. The shifts were influenced by cue-producing others and events, and were conducted in settings constructed for emotional performances.

This emphasis on the staged nature of emotional displays doesn't imply that people always are totally manipulated in such performances. Nor does it imply that the personal experience of emotion is always a shallow facade. There are certainly profound differences in both emotional experiences and emotional displays across individuals and across settings. Some people routinely feel emotional responses more deeply than others. Some routinely are more independent than others from cues in a social setting. Yet, however many individual influences may be operating in a staged emotional setting, the fact remains that the participants routinely expect and are offered scripts with a greater or lesser degree of conformity, and with a greater or lesser degree of articulation between felt and demonstrated feelings.

The interactions among scripted setting, emotional display, and emotional display need to be more thoroughly investigated and better understood if a productive sociological theory of emotions is to be formulated. Dramaturgical analysis provides a useful framework, affording the opportunity to simultaneously examine the structure of staged settings, the processes of emotional display, and the constructed nature of the person's experience. It can be instructive about the manner in which emotions in a situated context evolve from expectations to diffuse readiness to specific performances. More work needs to be done in this area.

#### **(ii) The War Game: Analysis of a Military Reserve Exercise**

In his second paper, Zurcher extends the foregoing dramaturgical analysis to his participation in a three-day U.S. military reserve exercise. He attempts to illustrate the organizations' scripting of emotion upon its members and demonstrate the facility of dramaturgical analysis to incorporate micro and macro organizational factors into the study of emotion.

Zurcher's analysis is again very descriptive, largely composed of detailed descriptions of reservists' activities and emotional behaviors in response to cues, props, scripts and settings. For illustrative purposes, he again divides these temporally into: (1) preparing for the war game (rehearsing the organizational script); (2) traveling to the war game (engaging the organizational script); (3) performing in the field (enacting, modifying, or negating the organizational script); and (4) leaving the war game (disengaging the organizational script). In each of these contexts he illustrates the effects of the military's scripting of emotion upon its members, including the manner in which they did or did not conform to the script. But he went further in this analysis, also attempting to demonstrate the facility of dramaturgical analysis to incorporate micro and macro organizational factors into research on emotion.

Zurcher argues that organizations like the military can powerfully and effectively script emotions for their members, such imperatives routinely affecting them beyond the immediate organizational setting. The military organization's scripting for the war game in these four phases involved both verbal and non-verbal emotional expression. The reservists were guided by it when rehearsing, engaging, and enacting the appropriate war game affect.

Organizationally contrived emotional scripts can contain elements of flexibility that accommodate member deviances while still maintaining affective control. The war game script

provided organizational tolerance of “time out” emotional expression and explained participant complaints (e.g. bitching, sea stories) as natural to the stressful exigencies of the organizational mission.

There are no completely compelling organizational scripts for member emotional expression. Certainly some are more compelling than others (e.g. convent vs. factory), but, even as shown in the military, gaps or inconsistencies in organizational scripts are commonplace. Moreover, the script can't anticipate all situations in which members might be inclined to express emotion. Finally, members are not homogeneous in their perceptions/interpretations of the script. The result of these factors include the following alternatives for emotional expression, all of which occurred in the war game: (1) rehearsing the organizational script; (2) engaging and enacting it; (3) modifying it, including the creation of ad hoc scripts for emergent inclinations or situations; (4) negating the organizational script; and (5) disengaging from it.

Aside from the example of the war game, it is plausible to conclude that emotional scripting occurs in other types of organizations, that the scripting can be quite effective though not completely compelling, and that members' determination of script yields alternatives for emotional expression similar to those occurring in the war game.

We also must bear in mind that organizations are not entirely scripting entities, but made up of groups of people interacting and negotiating in a bounded setting. Future research should look at how these emotional scripts emerge, become organizational norms, and more fully attend to how and why members are affected by or affect the norms.

The final section of Zurcher's paper addresses the possibility of useful theoretical and empirical intersections between dramaturgical analysis, organizational studies, and new work bridging micro-macro approaches to social structure. He asserts that dramaturgical analysis can readily incorporate micro-interactional and macro-organizational factors in research on emotion. For example, in the war game, *micro phenomena* included members' formulations for rehearsing, engaging, enacting, modifying, negating and disengaging the organizational script for emotional expression. *Macro phenomena* included the scenario/scripting, feeling rules, staging/setting, lines, roles, props/equipment, latitude for bitching/deviance, and summary evaluation for members' expression (morale). Furthermore, the war game illustrated the importance of the immediate situation as a dramaturgical construct interfacing micro and macro factors in the expression of emotion. *Situational phenomena* included: gaps or inconsistencies in organizational planning (reasonable scheduling of participant time and activity, provision for adequate shelter, sleep and drinkable water); unanticipated events (fire and rain); the heat; physical activity which produced more fatigue than expected; the presence of media representatives in the field; the evening transfer of very senior officers and PR staff from the field to comfortable quarters on the base; the constraints on emotional expression incidentally imposed by some of the props (noisy helicopters and landing craft); the ingestion of coffee and alcohol. The immediate situation affected both the organizational scripting of emotion (e.g. canceling the night exercises in the interest of morale) and interactional emergents regarding expression (e.g. ad hoc scripting, privatizing of emotion).

Zurcher agrees with David Maines that the micro-macro dichotomy may not be useful for the understanding of social life, and agrees that we need to focus more on “mesostructural” constructs or mediating processes such as Anselm Strauss’ “negotiated order.” Such arguments inform the dramaturgical analyses of emotional expression and further adds to our understanding of the war game. Specifically, the immediate situation interfaced empirically and analytically with the macro-organizational and micro-interaction influences on reservists’ emotional expression. In that sense, the immediate situation was a mesostructural phenomenon.

The war game findings encourage consideration of a dramaturgical/mesostructural view for emotional expression as a useful frame for further research. It would include: (1) the macro organizational scripting of and scenario for actors’ emotional expression; (2) the meso immediate situation; and (3) the micro interactions between the actors - all of which interact with actors’ formulations for emotional expression. Corresponding to other recent work in this area, such an “emotional context” acts as a caution against any assumption of dramaturgical homogeneity. Indeed, the analysis of actor emotional expression in organizational settings is best captured by dramaturgical heterogeneity. There is not a single stage, easily or simply isolated for either empirical or conceptual purposes. Perhaps a better metaphor, given the above, would be a “three ring circus” where micro, macro, and meso realities occur simultaneously. These must be analytically integrated if sense is ever to be made of actor emotional expression in organizational settings.