

# Dramaturgical Theory: How do Messiah University Students Present Themselves in Front-Stage and Backstage Regions?

Maria DelPo

*Department of Psychology, Criminal Justice and Sociology Messiah University*

## Introduction

Human social interaction is intricate, entailing conscious and unconscious processes. Nonverbal forms of communication relate to the messages and signals conveyed through unspoken methods such as physical gestures, body posture, and personal spacing. When communicating in this way, individuals attempt to influence the impressions other people form of them by regulating this information. The goal is to present oneself in the ways in which they would like to be perceived by those they are interacting with. Sociologist, Erving Goffman argues this form of impression management influences how one is treated by others and is a key component of social interaction. **My project studies the ways in which Messiah University students nonverbally present themselves in front-stage and backstage areas on campus.** I chose to investigate this topic to better understand the intricacies involved in self-presentation among students. Understanding one's conscious and unconscious motivations in social interactions helps one to recognize the dynamics at play. This empowers one to improve communicative skillsets, master role transitions, and develop expertise in navigating human social behavior.

## Dramaturgical Theory

The dramaturgical approach addresses the study of human social life. Sociologist Erving Goffman analyzes human interaction through analogy with the theater. Viewing social encounters as performances provides insight into the nature of the self and its interaction with the broader moral code, that is, impression management. This process involves individuals striving to make the best impression on others, while actively working to ensure others believe they are making good impressions as well. Utilizing theatrical vocabulary, Goffman defines front-stage, backstage, performer, audience, scripts, costumes, and settings to investigate the tacit subtleties which construct social order. Front-stage settings have established stereotypical expectations and customs. In backstage regions, performances are unobserved by members of the front-stage audience. In this setting, the performer can relax and step out of character.

## Results

### Body Movements Support Gendered Scripts

- Women tend to sit in closed postures and cross their legs significantly more than men.
- Women tend to make themselves smaller in social settings, as evidenced by hand placement.
- In backstage environments, women are less likely to contract their bodily postures.
- Men in front-stage and backstage environments sit in wide positions more often than females.
- More men at Messiah University utilized video games compared to women in the front and backstage areas analyzed.

### Personal Space Conveys American Culture

- Personal space maintained by Messiah University students in front-stage and backstage settings reflect American social distancing norms which include four primary zones: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance.

### Social Distance Conveys Group Power Dynamics

- The physical distance held between individuals in social settings alludes to the power dynamics between people, as evidenced through the physical distance established between interacting individuals.
- Differing power levels, indicated by spatial distancing, are less evident in backstage regions.

## Reflection

This study brings conscious attention to the complexities of human social interaction. Practically, this knowledge can be applied to how individuals maneuver social engagements. Individuals can understand their social life, enabling them to combat social insecurity by practicing nonverbal gestures. Populations who experience autism would also benefit. Autistic individuals can increase social skills by understanding and practicing appropriate bodily postures to prepare for social interactions. By practicing social skills, they will be better prepared to adapt to complex social situations.

On an existential level, humans are designed to be socially impressionable and possess an inherent inclination for community. Fostering camaraderie and uplifting others is an essential part of the human condition. As expressed in the Bible, we are called to love one another as Christ has loved us. This requires us to encourage one another, demonstrating our role as disciples of Christ.

## Methods

### Data Collection:

- Forty photographs most recently published as of November 26th, 2022, were selected from Messiah University's Instagram account.
- Photos that did not display students on the Grantham Campus were removed. The final photographic data set contained 22 photos.
- Recent posts were selected in order to gain insight into the current social climate of the Fall 2022.
- Photos were categorized into front-stage and backstage spaces according to Goffman's dramaturgical framework.
- Photos were analyzed through a lens concentrated on student clothing, footwear, and body movement.
- Public behavior was observed in ten different settings at Messiah University. Five sites were deemed as front-stage regions and paired with five corresponding backstage locations.
- The front-stage areas include: a classroom, the campus green space, a mentor-mentee meeting, a Messiah University soccer game, and the Larson Student Union during a popular mealtime.
- Corresponding backstage environments comprise: a dorm building study lounge, a dormitory hallway, a Mentor-Mentor meeting, a Messiah University intramural volleyball game, and a Mellinger apartment kitchen during a mealtime. Figures 1 and 2 display an example of a front-stage and a backstage setting.
- Two hours of descriptive field notes were recorded on paper at diverse times in each setting. Observations prioritized clothing, footwear, and body movement.

### Data Analysis:

- Quantitative content analysis was implemented on the data sources through open coding to identify patterns across the coded data.
- Numerical values were assigned to raw data through the utilization of a code sheet.
- Both manifest and latent content was assessed.



Figure 1. Front-Stage Classroom Setting.



Figure 2. Backstage Dormitory Building Study Lounge.

## Discussion

- In social interactions, people follow scripts that abide by the roles they perform in both front-stage and backstage environments.
- Male and female students alike follow socially constructed gendered scripts to form good impressions on others and save face.
- Messiah University students shifted between scripts by modifying the personal space zone merited by the individuals in the setting.
- Student athletes provided social distance on the field to referees, particularly in front-stage settings, alluding to the differences in power, rank, and status.
- Power dynamics appeared differently in backstage outlets, where head mentors and subordinate peer mentors engaged in personal social distancing despite rank differences.
- In the backstage, individuals become more relaxed. This is reflected in the study where backstage environments fostered more intimate social distancing compared to front-stage environments.

“A new commandment I give to you,  
 that you love one another: just as I  
 have loved you...  
 By this all people will know that you  
 are my disciples...”  
 (John 13:34-35)

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