

Social Interaction and Everyday Life



Using Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model, explore the sociological significance of two contrasting social encounters. What does the model leave unexplained?

Your first task here is to explain what is meant by 'the dramaturgical model'. At its simplest, the model suggests that social life is a bit like appearing in a succession of plays – we know the parts we are expected to play and social life depends upon us all acting out our roles so the performances appear completely natural. The model also contains a number of more specific concepts such as encounters, markers, roles, impression management and front and back regions (see Classic Studies Box 7.2, pp. 268-9). All of these are explained in the chapter and you will need to describe them in your own words and show how they fit together into the dramaturgical model of social interaction.

You are also asked to *apply* this model to two contrasting social encounters and show how such micro-level phenomena are sociologically significant. i.e. what's interesting about the micro-level for sociologists?



'Contrasting' is an important word in this question. This usually means you are not expected to use similar examples such as going to consult a doctor and going to see the dentist. Instead, the question wants to encourage you to apply Goffman's concepts in different types of encounter such as interactions between intimates and strangers, in professional roles and personal roles, in private and in public, between people of the same and different sexes, in one-to-one and large group settings. Any of these dimensions would enable you to assess the model's applicability in different situations.

But what examples might you choose? Chapter 5 provides quite a few possibilities. You could contrast the art of not interacting with strangers in public places described in the 'Street encounters' example (pp. 265-6) with the management of a physically intimate interaction between a patient and a doctor (pp. 266-70). You could also draw on the example of the home as a back region in contrast to more public front regions. You might also like to think about how the dramaturgical model could illuminate examples drawn from other chapters in the book. For example, you might consider classroom interactions or the sick role. Or you could draw on examples from your own experience: going out on a date, going for a job interview, attending a civil or religious ceremony. Goffman's concept should be equally applicable to every aspect of our social experiences.

Having applied the model to your chosen encounters, **the final part of the question** asks you to reflect on the limitations of such micro-level work. What aspects of the encounters remain unexplained for example? Can the dramaturgical model tell us how doctors came to be held in high regard in society? Does it help us to understand why medical examinations can be so fraught with embarrassment? How does the model handle the thorny problems of power and domination in social relationships? What about social structural inequalities – does it adequately build in an explanation of their persistence and influence on social encounters? You should consider at least some of these lines of potential criticism in relation to the examples you have used. In this way, you will begin to appreciate for yourself and demonstrate in the essay some of the limits of the dramaturgical analogy and of micro-level interactionism more generally.