

Goffman in Bed

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I am an Erving Goffman purist. I like *The Presentation of Self* just the way it is, with stuffy Preedy as the exemplar of how we manage impressions. But when I discovered that my students found Goffman hard to read, I knew something drastic had to be done. Just as people spice up Chinese fortune cookies, I spice up Goffman with the equivalent of appending “in bed.” After students read *The Presentation of Self* in my social psychology classes, I describe impression management tactics: self-disclosure, managing appearances, ingratiation, aligning actions, and alter-casting. I share my own experiences managing impressions while dating, from borrowing my friend’s hiking boots to appear outdoorsy to spending hours compiling a perfect bowling outfit—cute, but quirky.

I then show “The Drought” from *Sex and the City*’s first season. The episode opens with Carrie accidentally farting while in bed with her boyfriend. Sociology ensues. When

Miranda comforts her friend, saying, “You farted. You’re human,” Carrie responds, as a Goffmanian actor might, “I don’t want him to know that!” The next twenty-five minutes reveal how all four women manage sexual impressions.

Back in the class, students offer experiences of their own. A young woman talks about the church-lady outfits she wears to impress her boyfriend’s parents. Girls talk about the importance of a bar bathroom as backstage. A student shares the art of telling someone what a great friend they are to avoid any further romantic pursuits. Students explain how they work to balance appearing too experienced with seeming not experienced enough. A male gives accounts that blame Coors for his sexual inadequacy or his date’s allure for his premature ejaculation. This is far from Preedy on the beach, and yet nothing could be closer.

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