



Meaningful Performances: Considering the Contributions of the Dramaturgical Approach to Studying Family

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Abstract

This article highlights the contributions of Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach to both understanding and researching family. With its interest in the performative nature of human interaction and the active construction of social reality, the dramaturgical perspective is particularly well-suited to study a dynamic social institution like the family. This article offers a brief introduction to the dramaturgical study of family by addressing important components of dramaturgy and contrasting it with other approaches to the sociology of family. The authors then demonstrate this approach in action by introducing two research areas that currently employ dramaturgical analyses – work on 'doing family' and the social construction of motherhood – and another that might benefit from such analyses, research on blended families. The article closes with further suggestions for future research attending to the performative aspects of family life.

Just last week, at the beginning of a section on social institutions, the first author began a class by asking a group of college freshman to write a definition of *family*. They had not yet talked about family and the assigned readings for the day – a selection from Lillian Rubin's (1994) work on the struggles of working-class families – offered no concrete definition. However, although each response was written independently, there was an almost unanimous agreement. Family is something that we, as people, *do* (Naples 2001; Schneider 1984; West and Zimmerman 1987). To these students, family is about emotional ties, intimacy, and interaction. While some students added that this might be counter to 'a traditional definition of family' which includes a mother, father and children, they still stressed that family is neither bound nor determined by conventional ties of blood, marriage, or adoption (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2008). It is this conception of family as something that is performed that is at the heart of a dramaturgical study of the family.

Our goal in this paper is to highlight the contributions of the dramaturgical approach, with its interest in the performative nature of human

interaction, to both understanding and researching family. We begin with an introduction to dramaturgy, addressing important components and contrasting it with other approaches to the sociology of family. We then review research on 'doing family' and the social construction of motherhood that employs the dramaturgical perspective. We close with suggestions for future research that attends to the performative aspects of family life, offering blended families as one area that illuminates the potential for such an approach.

The dramaturgical perspective

Dramaturgy, a term most commonly used in the theater, came to sociology through the work of Erving Goffman (1959). Goffman argued that, like the theater, life has actors and audiences. It is through performances that social reality – including selves and the social world – is created. While every social interaction is a performance and every person an actor, Goffman is careful to point out that in social life people often play parts and display attributes that they conceive as true to their selves (1959, p. 19). Unlike stage actors, who usually adopt roles that are inconsistent with who they are and actively create those personas through performance to influence the audience's perception of them, social actors engage in performances that create and sustain their view of reality, including their view of self. Although there must be some self-awareness to engage in these performances, many of these actions are done unconsciously. As individuals grow accustomed to performing their roles and engaging in daily rituals, certain behaviors become habits that they engage in without conscious attention (Schlenker 1980). The more that people act a certain way and engage in these meaning-creating interactions with others, the more real these performances become to them and those around them.

Of course, the authenticity of many performances does not mean that all are genuine. Goffman (1959, p. 15) himself talks about the motives that individuals have for manipulating and controlling the images that others have of them. These allusions to the potential artificiality of performances have inspired a critical view of dramaturgy by many. In this critical response, the dramaturge or actor 'is alleged to be a self-indulgent, scheming, deceitful conniver and con man who fashions an illusionary existence for himself by manipulating the thoughts and actions of others' (Brissett and Edgley 1990, p. 7). While such ulterior motives exist, in this article, we side with Goffman (1959) and choose to believe that people's engagement in the rituals of everyday life is largely consonant with their self-conceptions. With regard to the topic of family, in particular, we assert that it is not the motives but the actions that this line of research is most interested in. These actions, or performances, serve as the basis for definitions of situations and shape social life.

Consider contemporary motherhood. In an era of 'intensive mothering' (Hays 1996) where a woman is expected to give unselfishly her time, money, and love to her children, it is interesting that there are women who act as though they are endless fonts of these resources even though they might feel overwhelmed on the inside and resent either their children or these cultural messages and values. Rather than question the motives or the authenticity of the mothers' actions or the impressions they are formulating of selfless motherhood, as researchers interested in family, we believe what is true to the dramaturgical perspective is the effect of these performances (and the disconnect between appearances and authenticity) on the mothers themselves or those who witness these performances and accept them as reality. Even as Agnes Reidmann (1998) discusses her contrived and inauthentic performance at the events surrounding her ex-husband's funeral, she realizes that she is presenting a fiction to the community that they readily accept. Whether contrived or authentic, individuals are making meaning (Geertz 1983, p. 27) through their performances even when they are faking it.

The theatrical metaphor

In organizing their discussion of Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, Kivisto and Pittman (2007) highlight important components of performances relevant in both the theater and social life. Roles, scripts, costumes, props, and stages are tools that help social actors actively create the social world and ensure interaction runs smoothly. Imagine a mother preparing for a playgroup meeting at her home. Juggling the roles of hostess and mother, she prepares her home for other mothers and children. She sets the stage by cleaning the house and ensuring it is child friendly, putting out plenty of toys and chairs to set the stage with props. She might close off doors to the master bedroom and bath, as that is her private domain, 'a backstage' (Goffman 1959). Despite the absence of a formal script, she knows that certain pleasantries are expected as a hostess and that, as a mother, she should likely spend time chatting about her daughter and childrearing (Tardy 2000). She wears an outfit that is comfortable yet stylish and ensures that her daughter is clean and looks cute (Collett 2005). If any of these things is off (e.g. her clothes are too formal, she lacks seating, or she fails to welcome her guests), the performance could falter and her construction of reality, as well as her identity as a competent hostess and mother, may begin to break down.

Roles

To adopt certain roles then has little to do with objective characteristics tied to those roles and much to do with how individuals engage in role making, adopting attributes and behaviors consistent with their expectations of those positions. Roles are not typically strict codes of conduct and they

vary in ‘concreteness and consistency’ (Turner 1962, p. 22). However, they provide people with perspectives from which to guide behavior. The woman above might be classified as a mother by giving birth or adopting her child, or a hostess by owning the house where the playgroup meets, but it is her actions in that moment – her nurturance and graciousness, her concern and preparation – that ‘make’ the role and position her as a mother and hostess in interaction.

From the time that individuals are very young, they play house and dolls or war and cops and robbers, using performances to ‘try on’ the role of mother, father, Barbie, soldier and others. Such play also allows people to learn how others in certain roles might view them and view the world. Mead (1934) called this role taking, to adopt the perspective of another. People engage in role making and role taking throughout their lives. Rather than playing a police officer, that is their occupation. Rather than simply playing the mother, someone is another’s mother. Individuals perform the role expectations associated with these positions and, in doing so, they *become* police officers and mothers. In large part, their performances and the ways that they role make, or enact identities, is dependent on their ability to role take, imagining how others expect them to appear or behave and who they are in relation to others (Turner 1962).

Scripts

In most mundane and routine situations, there is a general script to be followed. The mother hosting the playgroup knew what was expected of her as a hostess and mother and she could anticipate the actions and reactions of the other mothers and children who would be attending. Deviating from the expected script can cause awkwardness or embarrassment. However, scripts are often flexible and in such situations actors may engage in ‘scripting’ (Hunt and Benford 1997) to define the scene and identify actors. The hostess might engage in altercasting (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963) to ‘cast’ individuals in particular roles and sketch out expected behavior. Through her performance, the mother can create a casual space or a formal meeting for the mothers and shape their actions, calling forth either personal stories and raucous laughter or discussion of specific topics and polite conversation. Because of ‘dramaturgical loyalty’ (Goffman 1959) and the ‘rule of considerateness’ (Goffman 1955, 1967), actors most often accept others’ scripts and stage directions and ensure that the performance comes off as originally intended.

Costumes and props

A significant amount of research on the dramaturgical perspective has centered on the importance of appearances in cultivating an identity or impression (e.g. Cahill 1989; Hochschild 1985; Stone 1962, 1990; Tseïlon

1992). It is through one's physical appearance (their dress, grooming, hairstyle, facial expressions, body size and shape, and the like) that they show others the kind of person they are, their attitude, and how they intend to act. Because of the interactive nature of these performances, appearances also clue others in to what is expected from them. These appearances are important, for 'in the absence of contradictory cues, people tend to accept others as they appear' (Turner 1978, p. 6).

Additional cues come from the objects that people surround themselves with – their props. The mother above cares about her own appearance and might choose a specific outfit and hairstyle fitting of the playgroup, but she also surrounds herself with items that speak to her identities and the type of occasion at hand. She has particular toys and foods available. Her furniture and home are considered extensions of her self, along with her children whose appearance and behavior are seen as a direct reflection of her (Collett 2005).

Stages

Goffman (1959) distinguishes between the front and back stages of social life, likening these regions to their theatrical equivalents. It is in the backstage, away from the audience, that one is able to let their front down. The hostess counts on having her master bedroom and bath as her domain, shut off from the rest of the party. It is a place for her to compose herself or to let herself be unkempt, to break from the impressions she has set forth on the other side of the door. The front stage, on the other hand, is where she carries out her performances and is expected to maintain control of herself and her appearances.

It is worth noting that women, in general, have fewer back stages, or places that they are able to relax from their dramaturgical efforts. While a home is often considered a backstage, this is truer for men than it is for women, even when one is not hosting guests. Women are largely responsible for the emotional, physical, and care-taking labor that transforms a house into a home and a household into a family (Hochschild and Machung 1989). Therefore, while men use the house as a break from paid labor, women must continue performing as they work 'the second shift'.

Dramaturgy and method

Despite the importance of role making and dramaturgical devices in constituting family and family roles, current research on the sociology of family largely overlooks the interactive, performative, nature of family. This is likely due to the importance of survey methods in family research and the proliferation of longitudinal data sets for family researchers to draw from (Cherlin 2005, p. 18). While surveys are relatively inexpensive, and longitudinal data is preferable to cross-sectional data, only limited information

can be obtained using these methods. Typically, researchers are unable to deviate from a pre-designed questionnaire and thus cannot probe for additional information or watch respondents engage in the relevant behavior.

Although family research has also employed observational studies and experiments, as well as historical and cross-cultural studies, quantitative research continues to dominate the field, focusing on demographic changes in families and society over the performative nature of family. The relative lack of research on interaction in contemporary research led Sheldon Stryker (2001, p. 152) to assert:

[The] total amount of sociological writings about family matters is very large, perhaps larger than it has ever been, but more of it seems to be sociological history of the family, comparative institutional analysis of the family, demographic analysis of family size and structure, or the byproduct of interest in other topics ... I am not contending that [such work] is of lesser import, only asserting that lesser attention and import attached to *relationships and interaction* – assuming such is real and not the product of my overwrought imagination – is disturbing. (*italics added*)

While Stryker is arguably correct in his assertion, as much of the contemporary work on family that is published in the top journals in both sociology as a discipline (e.g. *American Journal of Sociology* and *American Sociological Review*) and family as a sub-discipline (e.g. *Journal of Marriage and Family*) comes from sociologists working in population centers or with large data sets, this does not preclude an interest in relationships and interaction. Even surveys can be used to explore dramaturgical processes (Hunt and Benford 1997). Furthermore, it is not that the family area is without rich observational and ethnographic studies. However, this in-depth research on purposefully chosen individuals or groups who are not necessarily representative to the broader population is largely marginalized from the journals and most often appears in books (LaRossa and Wolf 1985). While there has been a recent turn to combine qualitative and quantitative methods, because of the long history of quantitative, demographic research, such quantitative methods still dominate the field.

Although there are many other topics we could focus on in this article, we chose work on 'doing family' and the social construction of motherhood as exemplars of the potential of the dramaturgical approach in studying family. Both areas are rooted in a symbolic interactionist tradition and have largely rejected the survey culture and cultivated rich bodies of research based on qualitative inquiry. As a result, they focus specifically on the importance of meaning and identities created through interaction and the relational nature of family (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969).

'Doing family'

'Family [is] a socially constructed object, a product of decidedly public actions and interactions' (Gubrium and Holstein 1990, p. 12). Although

the phrase 'doing family' – as a play on the ubiquitous 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987) – is often credited to Nancy Naples, the argument that family is 'not merely a natural constellation of individuals connected by biology [but] must be achieved and constructed on a daily basis' (Naples 2001, p. 33) had emerged in previous research (see also Schneider's [1984] discussion of 'doing kinship'). Most notable, perhaps, is the work of Marjorie DeVault (1991) on feeding the family. According to Goffman (1959), it is minute rituals like family dinners that highlight the performative nature of social life. In DeVault's research, mothers are the stage directors.

DeVault (1991) argues that mothers' roles as the organizer of the family is illustrated best in their planning of family meals. By arranging meals in a way that balances the needs of the family with the needs of individual members, mothers not only organize family life, but construct family relationships, boundaries, and meanings as well. DeVault (1991, p. 84) suggests:

In addition to producing meals, [mothers] organize their cooking as to produce a group life for their families. They adjust to work and school schedules, and as they make decisions about managing their work, they weave together the paths of household members. Their efforts are directed toward creating patterns of joint activity out of the otherwise separate lives of family members.

With a mother much like a director, taking into account the roles, script, and stage limitations, DeVault suggests that mothers help the family 'do family' through their performances. In other words, it is through planning and execution of these meals that households actively construct family.

In the same way, Carrington (1999, p. 5) argues that Lesbian families engage in loving and caring activities to construct, sustain, and enhance a sense of family in their lives (see also Sullivan 2004). Carrington outlines a number of specific strategies individuals use in constructing family. Like DeVault (1991), he argues that feeding work is central, but extends this to include general consumption as well, arguing 'the greater the level of consumption and the concomitant consumption work, the stronger the perception of the relationship as a family' (Carrington 1999, p. 178). In other words, when individuals share expenses – buying homes together, jointly paying for meals out, and so forth – they are 'doing family'. Of course, it is important to note that not all households have equal access to such performances. Family meals and common consumption practices are largely luxuries of the middle and upper classes. Carrington argues that this inequality in opportunity to 'do family' partially accounts for why those with fewer resources are less likely to talk about their households as families than those who are more economically privileged.

Carrington, drawing on Di Leonardo (1987), argues other performative aspects of family life like engaging in housework and kin work are also important. Much like the 'invisible labor' of meal planning (DeVault

1991), kin work (Di Leonardo 1987) involves attention to detail commonly reserved for those closest to us:

Planning, provisioning, and coordinating visits, celebrations, holidays, and transitional rituals; making phone calls and sending e-mail on a consistent basis; sending notes, cards and flowers at the appropriate times; selecting, purchasing and wrapping gifts; providing or arranging for the provision of healthcare. (Carrington 1999:111)

It is by honoring those one loves with these gestures that individuals cast others as members of their family (Weinstein and Deutschberger 1963), projecting the identity they desire of others for those others to enact. It is through these efforts that individuals socially construct family and other institutions (Daniels 1987). Such distinctions sometimes have life-altering implications. Gubrium and Holstein (1990, p. 119), in *What is Family?*, recount the story of a mentally ill young man's run-in with the police. When asked if he had family that he could turn to rather than being institutionalized, he directed them toward his 'mother' who lived down the street. While this woman's 'family status was debatable on both legal and biological grounds', she clearly cared for this young man, as he did for her. Their interactions in front of the officers, and her willingness to take responsibility for him and his mental health treatment, kept the police from pursuing other, arguably less favorable, avenues.

Similarly, in her work on lesbian families in the Bay Area, Sullivan (2004, p. 63) found she was unable to guess the biological mother in the families she studied.

I could not ascertain [who the biological mother was] from the initial in-person introductions and conversation ... [this] seemed to affirm that, aside from the physiological exigencies of pregnancy and childbirth, individuals wanting to fulfill culturally defined parental duties and responsibilities are not prohibited from doing so by biological incapacities related to being a non-parturient parent.

However, it is important to note that this 'tying in' was not automatic and 'the degree to which one feels and acts like a parent ... is related to what one does to make it happen' (Sullivan 2004, p. 59). While childbirth and nursing are important, it is the everyday rituals like picking a child up from school or planning playdates that constitute much of motherhood.

Largely because of the work by Carrington (1999), Daniels (1987), DeVault (1991), and others, research on 'doing family' is becoming more common. A 2006 issue of *Journal of Marriage and Family* featured a mini-symposium on how single mothers 'do family' – with an article from Margaret Nelson followed by a series of comments. Nelson (2006) argues that single-mothers, in an effort to stay afloat, call on others to help with parenting or bring others into their household, yet find a way to make the incorporation of others part of 'doing family' and also retain control over important family-building performances (e.g. disciplining). One of

Nelson's most important contributions to this line of research is the insight that by drawing boundaries to exclude some from their family, individuals are ultimately signifying who it is that they choose to include (Cherlin 2006).

Clearly, there is a strong tradition of research on the performative roots of family in these case studies, but it is not to say that since people 'do family' they are able to 'undo' it. In her discussion of the delicate balance between work and family for women today, Williams (2000) suggests that the agentic language of 'compromise', 'discussion', and 'choice' obscures the constraints women face. In reality, our social worlds are inherently inflexible. For instance, research shows that, despite the assumed fluidity of people's definitions of family, there are clear boundaries between family and friendship ties (Allan 2008). Even those families that are socially constructed through performances have specific roles that are cast and expectations for individuals who fill them (Carrington 1999). One such role is that of mother, which we turn to next.

The social construction of motherhood

Like the mother earlier who was setting the stage for her playgroup meeting, women actively construct their *identities* as mothers by attending to their *images* as mothers. One of the most important dramaturgical processes, which originated in Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), is impression management. In impression management individuals 'manage the impressions' others have of them by engaging in behaviors that alter their appearances or self-presentations. Of course, it is important to remember that self-presentation is not manipulative in a negative sense and images are often true to how the mothers see themselves for the self 'is a product of the scene that comes off and not the cause of it' (Goffman 1959, p. 252). Like many other identities, motherhood is largely a social construct (Marshall 1991). Rather than the biographical incident of conceiving or adopting a child, the way one presents herself in performances and the way she is viewed by her audience are largely what creates and sustains a woman's identity as a mother (see Sullivan [2004] for examples of such performances and a more critical view of the role of pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing in constructing motherhood).

While everyone wants to seem capable of satisfying their role expectations, competency is particularly important for identities on which one stakes a great deal of self-esteem. Certainly, motherhood satisfies this requirement, as women in all walks of life want to be seen as 'good mothers' (Collett 2005). The Western view of mothers as 'little more than architects of the perfect child' (Eyer 1996, p. 6), who are almost entirely responsible for their child's happiness and success (Ambert 1994), can lead women to be particularly concerned with how their parenting reflects on who they are as individuals. This is especially true today with the growth of 'intensive

mothering' (giving unselfishly one's time, money and love to one's children, Hays [1996]) and 'The New Momism' (devoting one's entire physical, emotional, and intellectual being to one's children, Douglas and Michaels [2004]) as barometers for successful mothering. The notion that mothers should have all the time in the world to give (Williams 2000) contributes to the struggles women face to appear competent as mothers by satisfying a myriad of expectations.

No mother is immune to these cultural messages about the importance of her role as a mother as they are so embedded in society that they appear natural (Ambert 1994). Working mothers and stay-at-home mothers both face great challenges as they attempt to be 'good mothers'. The working mother feels she must manage it all while the stay-at-home mother believes that she must give herself over completely to her children, losing her sense of self. Even stigmatized mothers, like teenage mothers (Rolfe 2008) or those in drug treatment (Baker and Carson 1999), go to great lengths to find ways to classify themselves as successful, even 'great', mothers and caretakers.

To create and sustain these images, mothers engage in various types of impression management. Baker and Carson (1999) found that substance abusers presented images of themselves as 'good mothers' by engaging in selective self presentation, 'accentuating certain facts and concealing others' (Goffman 1959, p. 65). The mothers, understanding that they were largely stigmatized by society, used self-enhancement – playing down their weaknesses and playing up their strengths. The women emphasized that their children were cared for – kept clean, bathed, fed, and so forth – and downplayed their own drug use's more detrimental effects. Voysey (1972) found similar strategies of selective-self presentation among mothers of disabled children. These mothers carefully considered how much information to disclose about their child's disability, and to whom, therefore exerting some control over the images they presented to others.

Other research on impression management of mothers specifically focuses on how mothers manage appearances to gain the approval of others (Collett 2005). Interestingly, the mothers in Collett's (2005) research feel that the appearances of their children are of more import than their own appearances in constructing their own identities. Because a woman is a mother in relation to a child and a wife in relation to her spouse, she is not only in charge of her own image, but serves as a 'team-manager' to shape images of other family members and the family as whole (Voysey 1972, p. 81). While true teamwork, where a projection 'is fostered and sustained by the intimate cooperation of more than one participant' (Goffman 1959, p. 77) constitutes much of any family's performances (DeVault 1991), such a cooperative effort is impossible for young or disabled children (Voysey 1972). Therefore, for these two groups, mothers take the lead and are seen as almost exclusively responsible for the appearance (Collett 2005) and manners (Cahill 1987) of their young children.

To ensure that their young children's appearances reflect positively on the women's abilities as mothers, women engage in a number of strategies (Collett 2005). Regardless of income level, the mothers ensure that their children have a selection of brand-name outfits, even if they are saved for special occasions (Goffman 1959). Mothers also take into account the social situation (and anticipated audience) in planning their children's appearances. While at home a child might run around in galoshes and his diaper, for church he is dressed in a suit and for preschool he wears something causal but cute. Another important audience is the mother's mother-in-law. For this particular scene, the child is dressed in a manner she would approve of and often in an outfit she had purchased. It is widely assumed that mothers should be self-sacrificing. To create this sense in interaction, mothers not only spend a great deal of time and money on their children's appearances, but do so at the expense of their own appearances (Collett 2005, p. 340).

Self-presentation strategies play an important role in constructing and maintaining who one is and who that would like to be, but they also are intimately tied to cultural expectations about who one should be. Roles and scripts are an important part of any family, but people tend not to realize how important they are until they find themselves in situations where these are unclear. While everyone has expectations about how mothers, fathers, and children should act, performance guidelines are less clear in step- and blended families. We turn next to such emergent types of families, where new roles are being cast and scripts are actively written as an illustration of dramaturgy's potential for other topics in the sociology of family.

An illustration of the potential contributions of a dramaturgical approach to current research on family

Although divorce replaced bereavement as the leading precursor to remarriage 30 years ago (Cherlin 1992) and fueled an exponential increase in research on divorce, remarriage, and blended families (Coleman et al. 2004), remarriage remains an incomplete institution (Cherlin 1978). Unlike in first marriages, where roles and behavior are culturally prescribed, the institution of marriage provides few cues for people who are remarried and who have children. As a result, such expectations vary greatly, even within families (Fine et al. 1998). For example, Cherlin (1978) reflects on a step-parent disciplining a step-child. Whether a step-parent has authority to punish (and the degree to which the step-child needs to accept that punishment) is up for debate in step-families in a way not experienced in original two-parent families. As a result, a step-father likely faces obstacles to establishing his position as a disciplinarian within the family. Nelson (2006) suggests control and discipline are an important part of 'doing family', and the rules of who is able to exercise those rights may be unclear in blended families (Dainton 1993).

Employing a dramaturgical approach, one might engage the issue of family disciplinarians using 'definitions of the situation' – conceptions of what is occurring in a social situation, who is involved, and what behavior to expect from participants (Goffman 1959; Thomas 1923). While social actors in a situation most often agree upon such definitions, they sometimes compete or conflict. Divergent definitions that are not resolved through negotiation or compromise can lead to significant conflict in interaction. For instance, in Cherlin's (1978) research, the step-parent may define a situation in which the step-parent punishes the child as in line with his parental duties, where the child, who may not believe that punishment should come from a step-father, believes such behavior is unwarranted and unjust. Such a disjuncture can have detrimental results for the relationship by exacerbating conflict and causing problems that extend beyond that particular incident.

Behind these differing definitions of the situation lays a disagreement between what it means to fill the role of step-parent (Coontz 1997; Dainton 1993). Goffman (1961) argues that when one performs a role, they attempt to align their actions with how observers expect the role to be enacted. However, such role-taking is difficult when there is ambiguity on the meaning of 'step-parent'. A step-parent may expect to have full disciplinary rights of a biological parent, whereas a step-child may only expect the biological parent to have such rights, and these ideas vary from family to family. It is only through research that explicitly gauges the role expectations of and for various family members (e.g. Fine et al. 1999) that the ambiguity of the stepparent to step-child relationship may become clearer, as will strategies to reduce the conflict that stems from such uncertainty (Atwood and Genovese 1993).

Another type of ambiguity (Sarkisian 2006) in families involves defining who is, and who is not, a part of the family. Stewart (2005) analyzes data from surveys and interviews that ask parents to report the names of each child and indicate whether the child is a step-child or a biological child. In comparing the reports, Stewart finds that there is more boundary ambiguity – that is disagreement about who is or is not part of the family – within step-families than in original two-parent families, and that those who are physically outside the home are less likely to be considered part of the family. Similarly, Schmeekle et al. (2006) find that adult children from step- and blended families are more likely to perceive a parent's partner as 'a parent': (1) if the parent's partner was married to the biological parent; (2) if the child lived in the parent's partner's household; and (3) if the parent's partner became the partner when the child was young.

These results clearly complement research on the importance of 'doing family' in creating familial ties (Carrington 1999; Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991; Naples 2001). If the step-parent and child either currently, or at one time, shared a home together, they may have participated in activities that help to create a feeling of family mentioned – eating together, doing

chores for the family, doing activities together, buying each other gifts for holidays and birthdays, and so on. Doing this sort of kin work should increase the feeling of familial relationship and the likelihood they would classify step-children or step-parents as family in surveys and interviews.

Drawing on the largely qualitative work on 'doing family' not only enhances the quantitative findings on 'boundary ambiguity', but also may help explain King's (2007) finding that one of the few situations in which children report being closer to their father than their mother is when they live with fathers and step-mothers. If there are fewer opportunities to be together, there are fewer opportunities to create and sustain the intimacy of family. Knowing the importance of enacting these relations for perceptions of family ties and the strength of those connections is an important step in determining how to facilitate such outcomes. Giving family members (whether step-parents living with children or non-resident biological or adoptive parents) the opportunity to engage in kin work from afar, to 'do family', is important in creating or sustaining those familial links.

Future directions

Generally, any research that focuses on the performative aspects of family – as well as the importance of these performances for affective and cognitive outcomes – is employing a dramaturgical perspective and we believe such work is a worthwhile endeavor. Bringing relationships and interactions to the center of research is a key part of a well-rounded approach to studying family and should be encouraged. However, the only way to explore definitively the importance of 'doing family' on building intimate relationships is to take the dramaturgical approach in research and systematically document the effects of family performances. Despite this general call, we have a handful of specific suggestions for future research.

A dramaturgical perspective could also enhance researchers' understanding of fathers, including their contribution to family dynamics and processes (e.g. Coltrane 1996; Dienhart 1998; Doucet 2006; Wilcox 2004) and the social construction of fatherhood (e.g. Drakich 1989; White 1994). Careworkers also comprise an important component of many families today (Meyer 2000). While some have explored the caring labor of mothers for their children (e.g. Daniels 1987; DeVault 1991), there is less research on the care provided to parents and other relatives (for exceptions, see Bowers 1987 and Meyer 2000). Furthermore, researchers must explore the dynamics created with 'non-family' members who are hired to provide care for those they love. Often with families of their own, and with a growing number of those families far removed geographically (Hochschild 2003), the dynamics of such carework, both inter- and intra-family, are important to consider.

A salient theme that emerged in reviewing the literature for this manuscript was that impression management occurs both within the family and as it negotiates its place with outsiders. Step-mothers use impression

management to establish their positions within the household (Dainton 1993) and mothers manage appearances for even their in-laws (Collett 2005), but each group also uses self-presentation strategies establish positive images in the eyes of friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. In a sense, family members are managing impressions in both the front and back stages (Goffman 1959; Gubrium and Holstein 1990). This is, of course, especially true for women who work a 'second shift' (Hochschild and Machung 1989) at home, cultivating a particular environment while their husbands are able to engage in backstage behavior. Given what sociologists know about the importance of significant others in the formation of self-concept and self-esteem, it would be interesting to explore whether these impression management within the family has different effects on constructing reality, including one's sense of self, than self-presentation done in less intimate relations.

Another interesting way to draw on the work of Dainton (1993) and Collett (2005) would be to investigate the differences between working to actively achieve idealized role expectations (like the sacrifices mothers must make for their children) and working to actively refute the myths associated with a stigmatized role identity (like the evil step-mother). Perhaps the greatest insight with regard to this dialectic can be found in groups like the substance-abusing mothers who balance both burdens (Baker and Carson 1999). Is it easier to appear to be – and ultimately be – someone positively valued than it is to make clear that one is not who others might assume they are.

Finally, following Hunt and Benford (1997), we encourage future research to take seriously methodological questions in dramaturgical research more generally and the area of family more specifically. Ickes (2000) suggests that while observational data, which is arguably the best way to get at the performative nature of family life, might be some of the most valid available, it is also the most invasive regarding participants' privacy and raises other ethical questions that researchers must consider. It is also worth noting that the 'back-backstage' (Tardy 2000), where taboo topics are broached, is often off-limits to researchers. While other methods, including surveys and interviews, have been used to capture dramaturgy in the family, researchers need to be aware of the potential biases in subjective responses and explore how to make dramaturgical research affordable, efficient, and reliable. One potential place to look is in interview-based data sets (e.g. TLC3 [England and Edin 2005]) that collect responses from more than one family member, offering a more rounded picture than those that rely on one respondent's view to capture the essence of a family and its dynamics.

Conclusion

In this paper, we present an introduction to the dramaturgical study of family by offering brief introductions to current research in the area

including work on 'doing family' and on the social construction of motherhood. To illustrate the potential of dramaturgy, we highlight a growing area in the sociology of family – work on alternative and blended families – that we think might benefit from a more dramaturgical approach. Throughout these sections, we also illuminate some key aspects of dramaturgy including role taking, impression management, and the definition of the situation. We conclude with only a brief sampling of directions for future research. Like Sheldon Stryker (2001), we see great promise in an interactive and relational study of family and we believe that dramaturgy offers a unique approach to such research.

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Short Biographies

Jessica L. Collett is an assistant professor at the University of Notre Dame. Her research is largely social psychological and primarily focuses on group processes, self and identity, and emotion. Recent work exploring the relational outcomes of alternative dispute resolution, including perceptions of fairness disputants have of one another and their optimism about future interactions, appears in *Advances in Group Processes*. Other work examining other cognitive and affective outcomes of exchange relations is in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, and *Social Psychology Quarterly*. Collett holds a BA in Sociology and History from Winthrop University and an MA and PhD in Sociology from the University of Arizona.

Ellen Childs is a graduate student of Sociology at the University of Notre Dame studying religion and social psychology. Her MA thesis explored the reciprocal relationship between church attendance and happiness. Childs holds a BA in Sociology, History, and Global Studies from the University of Minnesota.

Note

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