

# All the world's a stage: the drama of OCR psychology

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*"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, ....."*

As You Like It , 1598

"All the world's a stage ..." it's one of the few quotes I know from Shakespeare. In fact I only know the first line, but I managed to look up the rest. The idea is that we experience life as drama, and Shakespeare's observation is remarkably appropriate today as we spend so much time creating drama from our own lives and the lives of others.

Reality television creates drama out of the lives of the contestants. We turn people into heroes and villains, we see them struggle through personal crises, achieve triumphs and disasters, and all the time we can watch this safely from the other side of the screen, and have it all stage-managed for us by Davina or Ant and Dec or whoever. The activities of the contestants become like a drama - a staggeringly dull drama, but a compulsive one because it is relatively unpredictable and because it appears very real. This is in contrast to many of the scripted dramas we watch, like Coronation Street, Eastenders or The Bill, which are very predictable and often quite unbelievable. Is there a street in Manchester that has so many small businesses, or a pub in the East End of London that has so many parties?

The distinction I have made above between scripted and unscripted drama is important for our understanding of some psychology studies. When we watch Phil Mitchell being hard and rasping out "We've gotta talk, you muppet!", we know he is speaking the words of a drama that someone else has written. On the other hand, when we see a reality contestant like Jade Goody chatting away then we know she made it all up herself. But, how unscripted is it? Sure, nobody hands Jade a script, but she knows what is expected of her in the roles she has taken on, and she speaks the words that go with them.

Every social encounter has a number of possible scripts for us to select from and if we deviate from these scripts we will run into some trouble. Imagine this, you meet someone you know walking down the road and they say "How are you?". Do they really want to know? If you reply with a long statement about the state of your mood, mind and bowels, they probably will never ask you the question again. The appropriate response is "Fine, and how are you?" Its as if you have a script and you have to follow it.

In fact, sometimes the script becomes more important than our behaviour. Many people have a video taken of big events such as weddings. Sometimes they have a dress rehearsal so that it all goes according to plan and the video will look fine. Sometimes if the camera operator doesn't get the shot they want, the bride and groom will act it out again. In this case, the bride and groom are creating an ideal drama of a wedding rather than allowing

the video to record what actually happens at their special event. The bride is *acting the part* of a bride rather than *being* one. Odd isn't it?

If you are interested in this life as drama idea then I recommend you read the work of Erving Goffman. But for now, I want to use this idea to have a look at the core studies in the AS course. The core studies are all dramas and your role as the student is to be able to tell the story of the drama and also to be a critic of that drama. These core study dramas, like theatrical dramas, have a number of components such as,

*Actors, Scripts, Authors, Stage, Props, Audience, Out-takes, Critics*

If you know about these components and can comment on them then you are on your way to being very successful on this course. But why, you ask, do I have to see them as a drama when I can just learn them anyway? Good question, but I hope to show you that the studies will make more sense, seem more coherent, more memorable and more interesting this way.

### **Actors**

The actors are the people we see in the studies and the people who do the action that makes up the drama. Sometimes they are the participants and sometimes they are the experimenters. Some of the actors take starring roles, for example the prisoners and guards in the prison simulation, or Freud and Little Hans in the famous case study. Sometimes they are extras to the drama without a speaking role, for instance the passengers on the subway trains that react to the bogus emergency.

Some of the actors become stars beyond the psychological study. One example of this is Christine Sizemore, who we know as Eve from the study by Thigpen and Cleckley. She has written accounts of her experiences and you can find out stacks of information on her from the internet. Another star is, of course, Washoe and she, like Christine Sizemore, is all over the internet. If you want you can become a 'friend of Washoe' though whether this means you get to hang out with her in clubs and bars is not clear. And talking of stars, what greater accolade can you have than to appear in *The Simpson's*? As far as I know only one of our core study authors has done that - Stephen Jay Gould.

Not everyone in the studies becomes a star, and many remain as a number. Even so we can still see these studies as dramas with actors who step out of the pages of the textbook to give the stories some colour. If you want to get a better understanding of the studies then imagine yourself into the role of participant. Ask yourself what you have to do in this study and how it makes you feel?

### **Scripts**

Sometimes the action is scripted and sometimes it is not. Take for example, the Milgram study and we can see this mixture at work. The 'man who gets the shocks' and the 'man in the grey coat' both follow a script, but the participants make up their own dialogue. One of the discussion issues about this study concerns how much freedom the participants actually had in their behaviour and how much their behaviour was shaped by their role of

'experimental participant'. Were the participants playing the role of the 'good participant' and 'helpful member of society', and does this explain their behaviour?

When you look through the core studies you will see that many of them have a component where there is a tight script with some gaps for the participants to respond in. In the study by Samuel and Bryant, the experimenters go through a rigorous procedure (script) with the children, and at the crucial moment the children are allowed to make their response.

Some of the studies are relatively unscripted and, like reality television, we watch the behaviour of people unfold before our eyes. The brave study by Rosenhan's observers to enter psychiatric hospitals posing as mentally disturbed people has an unpredictable outcome, and the brevity of the article can not convey the experience of being in the asylum of several weeks. Imagine the Big Brother house without the good facilities, the alcohol, the positive strokes and the fun; throw in the smell of antiseptic and stale urine and you have half way to the asylum. The behaviour is not scripted but, like Big Brother, there is still a powerful drama going on.

### **Authors**

Who writes these scripts and creates the stages for people to behave on? These people are the authors and directors of the drama and they are usually the psychologists who write the core study. Sometimes the personality and attitudes of the author can be seen in the drama and sometimes they are less evident. If you look at the case studies by Freud and by Thigpen and Cleckley then you read the authors' interpretation of events and this is inevitably coloured by their expectations. Freud interprets as he writes, and so we have his explanation for Hans' fear of horses. I think it is important to know who the author is, because it helps us to better understand their story and to know how much of it to believe. I don't mean to say that the authors tell deliberate untruths, but they might see the world differently to me and come to different conclusions about the evidence.

It is just the same with stories outside psychology; we want to know who is telling us the story and what part of it is their observation and what part is their interpretation. For example, I like to read Richard Littlejohn in *The Sun*, but I don't agree with everything he writes and I take into account the values that influence his writing. Also, when we hear reports about how, for example the NHS is doing then we judge them differently if they come from a medical doctor, a witch doctor or a spin doctor.

### **Stage**

One of the most established findings from social psychology is that the situation we are in will predict our behaviour more than our personality. For this reason, the situation we create for our psychology studies (the stage) is an important component of the drama. Some studies describe this very fully, for example in the subway samaritan study we read that the drama takes place on a New York subway train between two named stations. In this case we have a very clear picture of the stage. Even if we have not been on the New York subway, we have seen it in countless films and most of us have travelled on a city subway at some time.

We can see some of the stages in pictures or videos taken at the time. These include the Milgram study, the Bobo study (Bandura, Ross and Ross) and, of course, Washoe. In some of the other studies the stage is almost invisible and we have to guess where the study was carried out. We don't really have a clear picture of the stage for the Samuel and Bryant study, or the doll study by Hraba and Grant or the discrimination study by Tajfel. They were all, however, carried out on a social stage, and this stage will have had an affect on the behaviour of the actors (participants).

The stage of the mental hospital for the Rosenhan study illustrates how close these studies are to theatrical drama. Rosenhan (the author of this study) is known to have met and discussed the issues of mental institutions with Ken Kesey who then went on to write *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. This was later made into a film with Jack Nicholson, and if you haven't seen it then I recommend it to you. (You know it makes sense - a trip to Blockbuster to do your psychology homework, obviously stopping at the Paulo's Pizza Parlour on the way.) Psychology and literature deal with the same issue and each provides a different but similar take on it.

### **Props**

Some dramas require props to have their full effect, though some can do without. Our core studies have some great props including the inflatable doll (Bobo), Sally and Anne (also dolls), and the shock generator. There is also a wide range of props used in the experimental studies, such as the equipment used by Sperry to test his split-brain patients, and the perceptual tests described by Deregowski, and the EEG equipment used by Dement and Kleitman to measure brain activity during sleep.

### **Audience**

I ought to say a brief word about the audience because they also have a part to play here. Dramas are usually said to be successful if they become popular. This is also the case with our psychology studies. There are thousands of studies carried out every year but only a few break the surface and become prominent.

It is worth noting that the studies that become prominent are not necessarily the best or the most scientifically important, though some are. Studies become important because they touch the readers in some way and tell us something about the human condition. The Milgram study is over 40 years old, but it is still, arguably, the most striking piece of research in social psychology. I would also argue that it still has something important to tell us today. By way of contrast, the study by Tajfel, appears to be flawed and strangely remote from everyday life, but it is important and often quoted because of all the subsequent work that it stimulated.

The audience is important because we can make or break these studies. If we stop applauding the Milgram study and stop being challenged by it, then it will slowly drift out of the text books and become a curiosity, just like the stars of music hall. So, if you all believe in Milgram, clap your hands.

### **Out-takes**

The studies have their out-takes, but like regular films and television shows, we are not usually aware of these. Zimbardo gives a pretty good insight into the prison simulation study on his website and includes some out-takes that describe how he became caught up in the simulation and started to behave differently. Some of the studies cut out the subjects they did not want in the final results. This is not uncommon in scientific research, and an example of this is the Schachter and Singer study where we appear to have lost a whole condition of the experiment. In the subway samaritan study we are told that the actors did not want to play the part of 'the drunk' and so avoided this condition on a number of occasions. These confessions are rare and, on the whole, the out-takes are well hidden.

## **Critics**

The final phase of drama to consider is the role of the critic. On this course we encourage you to be the critic. It is sometimes helpful to know what other critics have said about a study, but in the end we are more interested in your opinions than theirs. The questions for the studies are similar to those for film drama, for example is it believable?, and 'is it realistic?' You are probably taught these things under the title of 'evaluation', but it's the same thing as writing a critique. Figure out your view of these dramas and be prepared to write about it in the examination. Be a critic.

## **Epilogue**

So, there you have it.

*All psychology is on a stage, and all the men and women merely participants.*

Sadly, this doesn't sound as good as Shakespeare, so maybe I should go back to the day job.

Adieu

**TEXT BOX** (for insertion somewhere in the article)

Read the studies and think of them as dramas

You want to know,

- who are the actors
- how scripted is the behaviour
- who wrote the script and directed the drama
- what props did they use
- what are the out-takes
- is the story any good?

## **Biographical details**

Phil Banyard is Associate Senior Lecturer at The Nottingham Trent University where he teaches on introductory psychology and health psychology courses. He has written books and articles on psychology, most recently *Introducing Psychological Research: Seventy*

*studies that shape psychology, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, (with Andy Grayson, Palgrave: 2000), *Controversies in Psychology* (Routledge: 1999), and *Psychology in Practice: Health* (Hodder and Stoughton: 2002). When he is not writing he can usually be found watching Nottingham Forest or catching up on the adventures of Xena Warrior Princess. Many think he should get out more.