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# Interviewing as Theater

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“A life is not ‘how it was’ but how it is told.”  
Jerome Bruner

## Introduction

From the perspective of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory, each social interaction in everyday life may be understood as a stage performance in which the participants in a particular interaction perform their roles in an effort to create and control the impression they make on others. Goffman argues that “any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management” (Goffman 1959:152). In order to create an impression, participants in an interaction conduct a performance, which Goffman understands as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman 1959:8). The goal of such a depiction is thus “to sustain a particular definition of the situation” and persuade the audience that the performer’s definition of reality is unquestionably real (Goffman 1959:53). The performance embraces both “frontstage” and “backstage” for this purpose. Goffman defines frontstage as

that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. “Frontstage” is then the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance (Goffman 1959:13).



A performance presents an idealized picture of the situation, and everything that the performer seeks to hide from the audience remains backstage. Goffman defines backstage as

a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course (Goffman 1959:69).

This paper applies the dramaturgical approach to social interaction in analyzing qualitative interviews as a specific type of everyday “theater.” It focuses on analyzing the frontstage performances of interviewees in the theater as well as the role of interviewers who, being assigned the role of audience, seek to understand the narratives presented frontstage and uncover what remains backstage. This article thereby addresses two major methodological issues. First, it examines how and why people modify, either consciously or unconsciously, their stories as presented frontstage in an interview, such as by providing selected elements of the story, improving the appeal of their stories, forgetfulness, lying or deception, and so forth. Second, it explores the strategies that sociologists may apply in trying to avoid misleading interpretations of the subjective narratives that are presented frontstage in the interview. Although this approach might be critiqued for its supposed view that individuals are manipulative and untrustworthy, such behavior may be viewed in a positive light as well. The basis for this view is provided by Charles H. Cooley, who observes that “if we never tried to seem a little better than we are, how could we improve or ‘train ourselves from the outside inward’?” (Cooley 1922:352).

Empirical data for the present study was provided by two sociological research projects in which the author of this paper participated. The first of these, *The Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities: Attitudes and Social Practice*, was a Lithuanian case study that was conducted in 2017–2018 by the Institute of Sociology of the Lithuanian Social Research Centre in order to explore the situation regarding human rights and equal opportunities. It involved a national quantitative survey (N=1009) and 30 qualitative face-to-face interviews with the directors of non-governmental organizations, the office of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, and indivi-

duals who had experienced discrimination and had filed complaints with that office. This project was funded by the Lithuanian Scientific Council.

The second project, *Addressing Trafficking for Labour Exploitation through Improved Partnerships, Enhanced Diagnostics and Intensified Organisational Approaches* (ADSTRINGO), was an international comparative study covering the nine countries of the wider Baltic Sea region, namely, Germany, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Sweden. This project was conducted in 2012–2014 with financial support provided by the Prevention of and Fight against Crime program of the European Commission, Directorate-General for Home Affairs. The empirical research in Lithuania was conducted by this author. In addition to documentary analyses of labor regulations, the research included 16 qualitative face-to-face interviews with victims of human trafficking and labor exploitation abroad; people who had worked abroad for a long periods of time and had various experiences of discrimination; directors of non-governmental organizations that assist victims of human trafficking and labor exploitation; and representatives of the Criminal Police, the Lithuanian Labour Exchange, and the Vilnius Labour Exchange.

The empirical data in these projects was generated through an analysis of traumatic individual experiences such as discrimination, labor exploitation, and human trafficking. For this reason, the traumatic memory argument was employed as an additional theoretical tool in order to gain a better understanding of interviewees' performances when they recalled traumatic experiences in their lives. This argument maintains that memories of traumatic experiences differ from those of other life events insofar as

the occurrence of trauma could change the way memories are accessed, with trauma survivors learning to halt memory retrieval in order to avoid intense emotional distress (Moore and Zoellner 2007:1–2).

In addition, stressful experiences “are remembered mainly in nonverbal, sensory form and as informational fragments” (Janet 1925, as cited in Porter and Birt 2001:102), which are then “processed in a manner that renders memory for the trauma difficult to re-



trieve explicitly as a coherent narrative” (Porter and Birt 2001:102). That is to say that traumatic experiences are remembered as fragments and, as van der Kolk argues, “only these memory ‘fragments’ are available in narrative form” (Van der Kolk 1996, 1997, as referenced in Porter and Birt 2001:102).

The empirical research conducted in the ADSTRINGO project and *The Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities: Attitudes and Social Practice* project supports these previous research findings. An additional factor of importance is being ashamed both of what has happened, and of the possibility that other people will come to know what has happened. This has a very substantial impact upon the narratives related by the victims of traumatic events.

The idea of regarding an interview as a theater performance first arose while collecting data for the ADSTRINGO project. Insofar as the aim of that project involved making a record of the stories of people who had experienced labor exploitation and human trafficking abroad, the sample of interviewees was formed with the help of representatives of non-governmental organizations that had provided assistance to the victims of various types of crime. During field work, the clash between stories as they were told by interviewees and the same stories as they were presented by the informed representatives of these non-governmental organizations was so vivid that both the fruitfulness and even necessity of conceptualizing this issue became evident. A number of divisions between the frontstage and backstage of performances also became clear during in the project—the fragmentation of stories, the presentation of selected elements of stories, the refusal to mention/remember certain events, making stories more appealing and convincing, using words that soften the drama of the trauma experienced, and falsification of certain (most often crucial) elements of stories. Another important finding that emerged from our interviews with non-governmental organizations that provide assistance to people who had undergone this type of crisis was that there apparently was a gender-based difference regarding the behavior of victims of labor exploitation. In this respect, it was very difficult for male victims to accept that they had been cheated, deceived, and exploited, and this self-deception prevented them in many cases from seeking and receiving help.

## Frontstage and Backstage in an Interview

Interviewing is a specific type of live, everyday social interaction. It is distinct from other types of social interaction in the sense that it comprises a focused interaction between people who are unacquainted with each other. Goffman maintains that there are two general types of social interaction, namely,

unfocused interaction, concerned with what can be communicated between persons merely by virtue of their presence together in the same social situation; and focused interaction, concerned with clusters of individuals who extend one another a special communication license and sustain a special type of mutual activity that can exclude others who are present in the situation (Goffman 1963:83).

The fact that an interview is focused, while also comprising an interaction between people who are unacquainted with each other, makes it easier for the interviewee, or the actor in the performance, to control the situation and manage the impression that they wish to make on the audience.

As is the case with other everyday interactions, an interview performance is divided into frontstage and backstage. The frontstage consists of the narratives and body language of the interviewee, while the backstage comprises all that is either consciously or unconsciously kept off the frontstage. The backstage thus includes those fragments of the story that were not used frontstage as well as the wider context of the story. An interviewer who performs the role of audience in an interview must collect a broad range of information that will later assist in interpreting the data. The most problematic task in this data collection and interpretation is in fact uncovering what has been left backstage.

In general, people use stories to make sense of their lives and present themselves and their experiences to others (Sarbin 1986). In doing so, they recreate their life story according to the definition of the situation that they employ. Accordingly, an interviewee constructs an identity in a given narrative that sifts out unwanted information during the interview, which serves to create a gap between subjective and objective reality. This division becomes particularly apparent when researching traumatic experiences.



In the ADSTRINGO project, which analyzed the traumatic experiences of human trafficking and labor exploitation outside of one's home country, several interviews stand out as good examples of the divisions between frontstage and backstage, or what may be referred to as subjective and objective reality. This project utilized interviews in order to capture the general tendencies of labor exploitation by means of stories of individual experiences. The goal was to reveal the unembellished scope and character of the problem in light of the failure of both official statistics and police records to indicate the true situation. However, it became apparent while conducting research that the frontstage of the interviews with the victims of labor exploitation and human trafficking also failed to reveal the true situation. The majority of the victims either avoided speaking about their experiences, felt ashamed, or sought to ignore such traumatic episodes in their lives. It also became obvious that many smaller incidents were not recognized as exploitation since they were so widespread that they came to be regarded as almost normal or natural. This had already become clear through previous research.

We analyze below two examples of narratives regarding individual stories. The first is labelled "I was bored and wanted to see the world." The actor in this story is a 34-year-old man who had worked abroad for eleven years in a European Union country before returning home to Lithuania. His narrative provides a clear example of embellishing a story by providing only selected elements of that story while not mentioning crucial events and motives. The story is told from a distance—a long temporal perspective and the position of a settled man who has returned to his home country, now has a family, and is happy with what he has. The fact that the story is narrated from the perspective of a settled life may help to explain why this person seeks to ignore or understate less successful periods in his life and includes only those elements that correspond to his recent status (see Table 1).

**Tab. 1** - Interview performance “I was bored and wanted to see the world.”

Frontstage As narrated by the interviewee	Backstage As narrated by “significant others” who are familiar with the situation
The interviewee was a 34-year-old man who had 11 years of work experience abroad.	The interviewee was included in the sample as a result of discussions with people who were very familiar with his story.
<p>“It became boring. There was such a routine. I wanted to look for adventure, just to see something different in my life. I was bored. I wanted to see the world.” (Interview No. 5, ADSTRINGO, 2013)</p> <p>“I worked long hours. I wanted to earn money. I worked every weekend... I didn’t encounter any discrimination. Except maybe the attitude of the English towards migrants, which is quite negative. They never tell you that in a straightforward way. And I completely understand them. There are too many migrants there. I wouldn’t be satisfied if we had a situation here similar to the one in England. For sure.” (Interview No. 5, ADSTRINGO, 2013)</p>	<p>He did not have a skilled job; worked in a grocery store in a small town; received a low salary; had no prospects; was constantly short of money; decided to emigrate.</p> <p>He had no insurance; no employment contract; usually worked through the labor exchange, which took a percentage of his salary; and was not covered by the Labour Code, which meant that overtime hours were not paid properly.</p>

This table makes clear the very large difference between the narrative of the interviewee and the narrative that was provided by people who were familiar with his situation. The data indicate that an interpretation based purely on the subjective frontstage narrative would present a picture of a young man who was eager to discover the world and test himself in a new environment. In contrast, the backstage of the narrative presents a contrasting picture of a man who decides to emigrate because of his difficult financial situation and lack of prospects. These two pictures provide two opposing views concerning the same situation, and a correct inter-



pretation of that situation would require that both are taken into consideration in an effort to view the story in the widest context possible.

Blumer argues that

[T]he use of meanings by a person in his action involves an interpretative process [...]. The actor selects, checks, suspends, regroups, and transforms the meanings in the light of the situation in which he is placed (Blumer 1986:5).

In the interview performance “I was bored and wanted to see the world,” the interviewee adapts his narrative by selecting, regrouping, suspending, and transforming his story. Everything he states is true, and it does not contradict the stories of other narrators. Nevertheless, the interviewee selects the most positive facets of his story and presents them as being of central importance. In this way, his decision to emigrate is narrated as dependent upon his general will “to see the world” and escape the situation of “being bored,” and he leaves aside factors that other narrators view as essential. The interviewee thus does not mention his “lack of money,” the fact he has “no prospects,” and his dissatisfaction with not being able to find a job that suits his education and aspirations.

The second table presents the story of a 20-year-old man who left home and his country at the age of 16 and went to the Netherlands on his own. He had only nine years of education. Police files and the records of non-governmental organizations indicate that he was initially exploited in theft schemes and later belonged to an organized crime group. He spent two years in juvenile prison in Lithuania for robbery. He received professional training in prison and participated in a resocialization program (see Table 2).

**Tab. 2** - Interview performance “I lived with my friends and later sat in prison for a while.”

Frontstage As narrated by the interviewee	Backstage As narrated by “significant others” familiar with the situation
<p>The interviewee was a 20-year-old male with nine years of education who went to the Netherlands on his own at the age of 16. He was sentenced to two years in prison in Lithuania for robbery.</p>	<p>The interviewee was included in the sample as the result of a discussion with the director of a nongovernmental organization that provided him with assistance as a victim of human trafficking and labor exploitation. The director knew very well what had happened to this person. She also noted that she had learned about his story from the police.</p>
<p>“I sat [in juvenile prison] for robbery. Organized [robbery]. But it was long time ago. Files in the court took a long time [to process]. And I sat [in prison] for a while in Lithuania.” (Interview No. 5, ADSTRINGO, 2013)</p> <p>“I lived with my friends [in the Netherlands], who were hiding [from the police].” (Interview No. 5, ADSTRINGO, 2013)</p> <p>“My parents were not against it. We lived like that. Very often I used to not come home.” (Interview No. 5, ADSTRINGO, 2013)</p>	<p>He was sentenced to two years in juvenile prison for participation in organized crime. He entered prison four years ago.</p> <p>He was trapped by human traffickers and exploited for theft.</p> <p>His parents are asocial. They did not search for their son when he was absent for a month in the Netherlands. He was 16 years old at the time.</p>
<p>Para-data (interviewer’s impressions): Speaks as an actor, chooses his words, and attempts to talk as if he belonged to the upper social class.</p>	<p>Para-data (interviewer’s impressions): Does not fully control his body language. Words and body language do not correspond. During the interview he stares at the belongings, watch, and other accessories of the interviewer, creating the impression that he is estimating their value as possible “income.”</p>



One peculiar aspect of this example is that the interviewee knew that the interviewer was familiar with his story, at least the major details. He nevertheless tried his best to persuade the interviewer to accept his vision of his situation. In a manner similar to that of the previous example, the interviewee provided selected items of information that were neither lies, nor fabrications—but he included only those fragments of the picture that emphasized and reinforced what he regarded as the appropriate version of the story that he sought to relate. The example also had another interesting component—the interviewee connected the fragments of his story in such a way that he appeared to be innocent and a victim of circumstances. For example, he stated that he remained in prison for longer than might have been expected because of the time the court took to process his records.

Goffman maintains that

[T]he performer who is to be dramaturgically prudent will have to adapt his performance to the information conditions under which it must be staged. Obviously, he will have to take into consideration the information the audience already possesses about him. The more information the audience has about the performer, the less likely it is that anything they learn during the interaction will radically influence them. On the other hand, where no prior information is possessed, it may be expected that the information gleaned during the interaction will be of relatively great importance (Goffman 1959:142).

The two tables above reveal that even if interviewees know that their audience possesses a degree of information about them, they may still seek to perform in a way that makes it possible for them to control the definition of the situation and create their desired impression on the audience. In the second example, the interviewee clearly enjoyed his performance insofar as being interviewed for a scholarly purpose reinforced his self-identity as comprising “an important case.”

## One Story, Several Versions

Cases involving social conflict comprise another important issue that has an impact upon the interpretation of subjective narratives. For instance, the various actors involved in one and the same conflict situation frequently have different points of view regarding what is happening, and their definitions of situations may differ from one another in a conflicting manner.

A pertinent example of conflicting definitions of a situation emerged during the *Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities* project. A main goal of this project was to collect stories regarding experiences of discrimination and the methods people employ to fight for their equal rights. The story described in Table 3, which can be found at the end of the article, displays five different definitions of one and the same situation by five actors who were either directly or indirectly involved. The issue concerns after-school activities in the Lithuanian language in the Vilnius District that surrounds the city of Vilnius, where Poles comprise a very large minority and the language of instruction in many schools is Polish.

**Tab. 3** - Variety of narratives regarding the same story: "After-school activities in the Vilnius District."

A complaint was filed with the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson concerning the situation regarding after-school activities in the Vilnius District. In order to investigate this story, a number of interviews were conducted with people who were either directly or indirectly involved in the situation.	
Actors	Narratives
<p>Actor No. 1: The Lithuanian community of the Vilnius District, who submitted two complaints to the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson.</p>	<p>"There is a lack of after-school activities in the Lithuanian language in the Vilnius District. [...] The Municipality does nothing about this." (The official complaint to the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson)</p>



<p>A complaint was filed with the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson concerning the situation regarding after-school activities in the Vilnius District. In order to investigate this story, a number of interviews were conducted with people who were either directly or indirectly involved in the situation.</p>	
Actors	Narratives
<p>Actor No. 2: Public activist and politician in the Vilnius District.</p>	<p>“There are almost no after-school activities in the Lithuanian language. [...] The Municipality does not favor ethnic Lithuanians in the Vilnius District.” “The Polish schools are under the authority of the Municipality, while the Lithuanian schools are under the authority of the Ministry of Education.” (Interview No.14, Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities project, 2018)</p>
<p>Actor No. 3: The Municipality of the Vilnius District.</p>	<p>“We do not collect data about the number of afterschool activities in different languages.” (Official response to the request of the Ombudsperson in “Decision of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson No. (17)SN-55)SP51”) There was no response to our request for an interview.</p>
<p>Actor No. 4: A public activist from the Polish national minority in Lithuania.</p>	<p>“Lithuanians have schools with swimming pools.” “They have to understand that there are Poles where they’re coming to live.” (Interview No. 30, Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities project, 2018)</p>
<p>Actor No. 5: The representative of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson.</p>	<p>“Parents have to be more active and approach the Municipality with their suggestions and organize activities.” (Interview No. 11, Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities project, 2017)</p>

In contrast to Tables 1 and 2, Example 3 presents only the frontstages of the narratives. These illustrate how each of the five actors defend their own definition of the situation by providing arguments that support their position. This example also illustrates how important it is to take into consideration the context of the narrative and collect as many different opinions as possible regarding the same issue. Since the goal of the *Quality of Democracy and Equal Opportunities* project was to collect stories of discriminatory experiences, this particular example was first heard during our interview with the representative of the Equal Opportunities Ombudsperson, who identified cases of discrimination that could be useful for our research. This particular case was also addressed in the subsequent interviews, from which five different narratives regarding the same story emerged.

### **Interpreting Interviews and Investigating Narratives**

As the figures make clear, interpreting and analyzing qualitative interviews often encounters the significant dilemma of how we should treat subjective narratives. It goes without saying that it is also necessary for interviewers to take into consideration any subjective qualities that they themselves may ascribe to the data being collected. In addition, not only may subjective narratives regarding one and the same event differ greatly from each other, perhaps none of them corresponds to what others accept as objective reality. Briefly stated, the data that interviewees provide researchers as they are being interviewed do not necessarily present an accurate picture of reality. There are three clusters of reasons for why this may be the case.

1. Interviewees wish to present themselves as better than they are. They do so by controlling the definition of the situation and leaving aside, on the backstage of a given performance, anything that they do not want to bring forward. The need to present oneself in a better light may be viewed as a natural desire in constructing a desired image of oneself and conveying it to others.



2. Interviewees may lie, avoid speaking, or present embellished fragments regarding socially-sensitive experiences. This includes the examples noted above concerning labor exploitation, discrimination, and involvement in criminal activities.
3. Interviewees may wish to provide socially desirable answers to questions that, for example, present them as behaving in a proper manner and do not conflict with a more mainstream ideology and value system.

Qualitative interview data involves subjective perceptions, attitudes, and points of view that are narrated by the interviewee from the perspective that is most convenient for them in a given situation and time. We must consequently draw a clear distinction between opinions and facts as we interpret this type of data insofar as they may not be objective, strictly speaking. When the researcher seeks to collect data regarding sensitive and traumatic events in human lives, it is particularly important to understand any psychological issues that may influence how people remember given events. Even when collecting data about non-stressful events, the researcher must understand that the past is remembered from the perspective of the present. In this respect, we should take into consideration the fact that something which happened to a person when they were a youth often tends to have a more positive connotation precisely because it took place when they were young.

Furthermore, the ways in which stories are related are as important as their content. Focusing on the context within which a particular story is narrated makes it possible for the researcher to identify and hear the stories that have been left unspoken (Bamberg 2004). This research strategy allows one to see what is behind the frontstage of a story and compare, if possible, a number of differing versions of the same story. An associated approach in data analysis involves employing a critical point of view regarding data that appear too perfect to be true. Sociological research becomes akin in this regard to detective work in that it comprises an attempt to view the given phenomenon being studied from different angles, through the eyes of the various participants of the story, in order to uncover what is behind the frontstage and remains hidden backstage. It is also impor-

tant for the sociologist to capture the para-data and body language of the interviewee—how the intonation changes, where pauses are made, gestures and other signs, and whether there is a correlation between body language and the narrative in question. Investigating the context within which a given narrative is produced creates an opportunity to acquire a deeper understanding of the backstage. Insofar as interpretation is also associated with context, it is necessary to take into consideration the narratives of other actors associated with the same story as well as the logical abilities of the researcher to explore the larger situation as a whole.

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this paper has been to apply Goffman's dramaturgical theory to an analysis of the social interaction that occurs during a qualitative interview. An interview, in a manner similar to other everyday social interactions, is a theatrical performance in which individuals present themselves to others and utilize various means to control the impressions that they make. This paper investigated the frontstage and backstage of the interview performance on the basis of the data collected in two empirical projects. It examined how and why people tend to modify the narrative stories that they present frontstage, and explored the strategies a researcher may employ in order to better understand what is left backstage. The present discussion has argued that the investigation of frontstage and backstage that a sociologist performs involves a search for evidence and clues that are not visible frontstage, but which might be uncovered through a deeper look at the context of the story, para-data, an analysis of the body language of the interviewees, and a number of varied subjective narrative interpretations of the same story.



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