



Karl E. Scheibe

# The Drama of Everyday Life

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Karl E. Scheibe

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For Wendy—  
my dancing partner

When I began to learn Portuguese thirty years ago in preparation for a sabbatical in Brazil, a young Brazilian composer of popular music, Chico Buarque de Hollanda, became my favorite. His lyrical poetry is delicious; his melodies, once heard, are unforgettable and seem natural and perfect. Here is a line from one of his songs: “*Eu hoje fiz um samba bem pra frente, dizendo realmente o que é que eu acho.*” (Today I have composed a samba right up front, really saying what it is that I think.)”

That is how I regard this book. It is a statement right up front—in the sense that it takes a radical (that is, fundamental) position on the nature of psychological truth. The position I take—that psychology must view life as drama and must not try to explain away drama—is not new, but I believe its statement here is fresh. Also, in this book I say what I really think on this topic, and I say it in a way that suits me. Psychologists take pains to back up their assertions with experiments and other reliable empirical compilations—what I think of as scorekeeping. I respect this methodology, and in a limited way, I employ it. The reader will find some new scorekeeping on the giving of proper names, on the incidence of schizophrenia in Connecticut over the last generation, and on the behavior of the stock market. Also, where it seems convenient and relevant, I do cite the corpus of conventional psychological research. But I discovered early in my career that much of what I read in the journals just doesn’t stick. Rather, I have found psychological instruction in the most unlikely places—in the questions of my students, in the testimony of my clinical clients, in poetry, in literature, in the newspaper, in reflections on my own experience, in visits to shopping malls and casinos, theaters, restaurants, and churches—places familiar and foreign. Relying on these observations of everyday life, I treat in this book a series of topics both abstract (for example, seriousness, indifference, authenticity) and concrete (for example, teaching, gambling, schizophrenia). The general objective is to show that a dramaturgical approach to psychology is both useful and exciting—useful in the sense that it might be applied in

the arenas of everyday life, and exciting in that it provides unexpected illumination for some familiar and important problems.

After an opening chapter, I have organized the book in a way that corresponds to William James's analysis of the consciousness of self (James 1890, vol. 1, ch. 10). The subjective "I" is what James referred to as Pure Ego—not an empirical self, but a source of dynamic interests. Seriousness, indifference, and boredom, the topics of Chapters 2–4, are not traditional motivational categories in psychology, but a dramaturgical approach gives them just this significance. The first of James's empirical selves is material. Chapters 5–8 discuss costumes and cosmetics, the marketplace, excess, and eating and sex as features of the material world that figure prominently in the drama of everyday life. James's conception of multiple social selves is represented by Chapters 9–12, which deal with a variety of arenas wherein social life is acted out—casinos, dance floors, mental hospitals, and classrooms. James referred to the third empirical self as spiritual. Chapters 13–15 discuss the meaning of piety, of gifts, and of being chosen, and the question of authenticity—what is real, what is a copy, and does it sing?

But this is, after all, a book, not a samba. This is a pity, for had I the talent of a poetic *sambista* like Chico, I might then reach a much larger audience and teach them more effectively. Sometimes poets can come right to the center of a major psychological truth simply by reflecting carefully on the experiences of everyday life. Then, if they have the heart and the art, they may express that truth in a way that convinces utterly, because the poem strikes an immediate resonance with the known but inchoate and unarticulated experience of people, convincing them without footnotes or the citing of sources. At the very least, the psychologist ought not to shun such truths because of their naked form.

A clear example of this sort of thing is a poem by Kenneth Koch (1994), "One Train May Hide Another." Koch took the title of this poem from a sign at a railroad crossing in Kenya, a warning to people who might be walking, unaware that a moving train might be concealed behind another. From this observation he developed the general insight that one idea may hide another, that one memory may mask another, that our current troubles may hide many other possible concerns, that today's headlines obscure most of the important news, that the fixation

of our attention on one possible danger makes us vulnerable to something else that could kill us. The recent film *Wag the Dog*, based on the conceit that the President of the United States might be saved the embarrassment of a sexual indiscretion if a war with Albania were quickly produced, was yet another expression of this psychological and dramatic truth: we tend to believe what we see, and we only have time and attention to see so much.

If I could whistle or sing such truths as may be found in these pages, I surely would do so, for that would be a good deal less effort for me and much more likely to be appreciated by my audience. Our dramatic forms change as technology permits. Nowadays, if you truly have a statement to make, you should make a movie—not write a book, a play, or a poem. Surely if Shakespeare were alive in our times he would be a screenwriter, and a most successful one. But I could not think to translate this book into either a song or a movie. Just to put it into words was trouble enough.

I agree with George Orwell, who said: “Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of a painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand” (1946/1968, 7). Even so, after one has been sick for a while, recovery can also be a sad prospect. There it is—the major source of our dramatic interest is now no longer a process but rather an object. Soon I will no longer live the production of this book, but will have to live with it as finished product. I noticed one day a volume by John Updike in a remainder sale. My heart sank—for if this is the fate of Updike, then what is to become of my poor efforts? Few of all the produced artifacts of human culture, precious few, are for the ages.

I confess this melancholy thought here neither to diminish myself nor to disparage my work, but rather to illustrate an important psychological and dramatic point. Like sharks who must swim in order to breathe, human beings must be in play, or in *the* play, if you like, in order to retain their psychological vitality. The play requires the Other, with whom some cyclic exchange must be achieved and maintained. The Other may be an audience, may be God, or Nature, or the Company. We keep going—remembering, unlike the shark, to rest and to dream.

This leads me to predict that some fair project will bid for my attentions and comprise material for my dreams after this one is cleared to the end. One book may hide another.

Goethe defined genius as “the faculty of seizing and turning to account every thing that strikes us” (in Richardson 1995, 172). Without making any claims about genius, I do say that two features of this assertion are worth the attention of psychologists. First, that one should have the courage to imitate, to seize anything that seems worth seizing and to turn it to account. Second, that one should have the courage to overturn, to be subversive of what we are given. In these pages I demonstrate a certain ruthlessness in seeking and seizing such materials as are within my reach. I also exhibit a confidence in my own everyday experiences as fortification for the assertion of a truth or a principle, something I was explicitly told *not* to do as a beginning student of psychology. But experience ripens understanding, and it is time for me to set aside the constraints of youth. I may be mistaken, of course. At least I have the satisfaction of stating my convictions; the reader can be the judge of their use and interest.



THE DRAMA OF EVERYDAY LIFE

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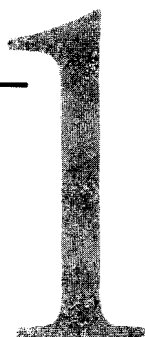
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## A QUOTIDIAN PSYCHOLOGY

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Everyday is all there is.

—Joan Didion



We arrange our days in cycles and seasons. We punctuate our lives with holidays and anniversaries, conventions and ceremonial gatherings. We collaborate with others to give shape to our days—inventing projects, saving our resources, then spending them, inquiring always to find out what is new, then passing on quickly to what is newer still. We count our days from certain especially remarkable events, such as the birth of Christ or the Covenant with Abraham or the Declaration of Independence. The years are alike in length and natural seasons; and yet the years of war command special and prolonged attention and even study, as if something depended upon our getting all of the details right. We seek occupations that will offer us variety and stimulation, and we seek to fill our leisure time with hobbies and exercise programs and feasts. We seek vacations from the monotony of our towns and homes, often to suffer considerable expense and pain. The idle rich, not content to be idle, buy expensive toys and endure synthetic privations. Ordinary people contrive to create regal pageants. Some young people (and some not so young), in order to avoid the bleakness of conformity to reason, choose instead the vertigo of easy highs. For the old, there is shuffleboard and talk of pains and operations. We dramatize. All of us. Every day.

These commonplace observations pose a challenge for psychology. Without an understanding of dramatic context, it is difficult to account for why someone would become a suicide bomber, or why a professional

athlete might consider himself underpaid at a million dollars a month, or why there are now so many cases of dissociative identity disorder, attention deficit disorder, and eating disorder, and so few new cases of schizophrenia.

These are among the questions that puzzle me—the sorts of questions that demand an intelligent and intelligible response from psychologists. Yet it seems to me that psychology—despite its diversity, despite its evident prosperity as a science and as a profession, and despite some remarkable successes in certain delimited areas—is not generally successful in offering convincing and satisfactory accounts of a wide range of events in our everyday lives. The historical reason for this limitation of psychology is the universalistic pretension of our science. The drama of everyday life is in constant flux. Psychology has had a hard time learning to swim comfortably in the river of history, for the old pretension was for the swimmer to explain away the river.

We need a quotidian psychology—a psychology that will help us to understand why so many children are bored to death at school, why politicians can behave in an overtly stupid fashion and pretend that no one notices, why academicians—intelligent and honorable people—often allow their public and private discourse to degenerate into childishness and indifference. I wonder that my students, while evidently much more sophisticated and involved in expressing their sexuality than were college students of my generation, profess considerable confusion about the scripts they might follow in cultivating genuine romantic relationships.

A quotidian psychology, or a psychology of everyday life, should enable us to understand—if not predict and control—the unfolding dramas around us. Such a psychology, I propose, must be enriched by the incorporation of the principles and the language of the theater. What are the precedents for such an enterprise?

## PRECEDENTS AND PRECONDITIONS

Two famous books of the past century have “everyday life” in their titles. I refer, of course, to Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901/1965) and Erving Goffman’s *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). At first

glance, these landmark works may seem to have little in common. Freud's work is one of the founding documents of psychoanalysis—a painstaking and eloquent argument for an inner psychic determinism. Freud defended the radical proposition that there are no psychological accidents—that slips of the tongue, forgotten words and names, common minor twitches, tics, and bungled actions (grouped under the opaque term “parapraxes”) are strictly determined expressions of unconscious urges—urges that cannot be expressed directly because of the repressive force of the outer layers of the personality. Freud's book is quintessentially psychological in that he conceives the mechanisms and processes at work as intrapsychic, with the external social world serving only as an oppositional force to inner dynamics. Goffman's book, by contrast, eschews the inner psychological world in favor of the interaction order—the horizontal nexus of social exchanges. A quote from Santayana serves as an epigraph of this founding document for the study of impression management—in part: “It is not urged against cuticles that they are not hearts.” Goffman preferred to study cuticles he could see rather than hearts he could only imagine—or could not quite imagine.

The language in Goffman's book is explicitly drawn from drama—used, he suggests, as metaphorical scaffolding for the structured study of managed impressions. Freud's use of drama is rather different. For him, dramas, such as Sophocles' play about Oedipus, are expressions of an inner psychological necessity. For Goffman, the necessity is presented by the drama, and actors are tossed about and controlled by its terms. Freud reduces drama to psychology; Goffman reduces life to drama, leaving out the psychology.

But both have “everyday life” as their range, and both focus strongly on errors, mistakes, misunderstandings. Freud's catalog of slips and bungs is not drawn from remarkably deranged or unusual people but from ordinary folk, including his family and colleagues as well as his patients. Goffman's observations of the arts of impression management are simply drawn from that part of the ordinary world falling into his range of vision. But no one is exempt or excluded from his cold-eyed analysis of the differences between impressions “given” and impressions “given off”—of individuals posturing and preening and colluding in ways that meet dramatic requirements, engaged in a soulless striving for

social approval and self-enhancement. Both books were written early in the publishing careers of their respective authors; but even so, both managed to be magisterial—establishing for each author a reputation for keen observation coupled with interpretive ingenuity. “Freudian slip” has become part of our general vocabulary, causing even nonbelievers to blush. Goffman has pervaded our language less than Freud, but because of his skill in interpreting how we wear our selves, he has reinforced doubts about whether there is a self, after all, beneath the apparel. Armed with these manuals, one might see the common stuff of everyday life with eyes newly opened—if the field is suffused with the light of skepticism.

It will not do to note the contradictions in the approaches of Freud and Goffman and to say that they cancel each other out—so that we can begin with a fresh slate. Of course, Freud’s rigid psychic determinism is no longer widely accepted, and doubts are justified about how he tailored his stories to suit his theoretical and his personal interests. Goffman’s antipathy toward psychology was perhaps justified by the shape of psychology in his times (mostly stimulus-response behaviorism or psychoanalysis), but the notion of the empty self has outlived its heuristic purpose. Even so, the legacies of Freud and Goffman must continue to receive respectful attention in the construction of a new quotidian psychology.

Since Goffman’s death in 1982, psychology has changed in such a way as to become much more hospitable as a companion to drama. Cognitive psychology is firmly established as the main focus of what used to be experimental psychology, and cognitive psychologists have discovered that they must be interested in story, in how stories are constructed and remembered.<sup>1</sup> Narrative psychology has become established as a major way of addressing issues that were formerly the province of static theories within personality and social psychology.<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Gergen’s (1973) landmark paper “Social Psychology as History” has been followed by many other works that have strengthened the relationship between transient culture and psychology. American psychologists have started to read European literary theorists and social critics, such as Bakhtin, Benjamin, and Moscovici, as a way of enriching and broadening the conceptual tools they can bring to bear on quotidian psychology.

The orthodoxies of the past lie shattered all around us. A remarkable example is Donald Spence's (1982) revision of classical psychoanalysis in *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*. The advantage of shattering orthodoxies is that one may proceed, as Spence has, to develop a line of inquiry in a way that follows practical interests, without fear of being attacked along the way by offended sacred monsters.

Jacob Moreno worked and wrote in an era when orthodoxies were most powerful, forcing his brilliant and innovative work on psychodrama to the margins of eccentricity and exclusion. Moreno's name is simply not to be found in contemporary psychology texts. More surprising still, he is not cited in the current spate of work on narrative psychology, or even in an admirable compendium of work on the dramaturgical tradition within sociology, *Life as Theater* (Brissett and Edgley, eds., 1990). Yet Moreno not only had powerful insights about the theatrical character of human life but developed from his ideas a set of revolutionary therapeutic practices. Group psychotherapy owes more to Moreno's genius than to any other single source. Because he was a psychiatrist, yet anathema to the dominant orthodoxies of psychoanalysis, Moreno built his theoretical house in a region set apart. Born in Rumania and reared in Austria, he lived and worked for the most productive part of his life in the United States. However, the psychodramatic tradition seems more alive and prosperous in Europe and Latin America than it does in his adopted country. Those who knew him suggest that Moreno certainly wanted recognition for his accomplishments; it seems an ironic twist that while his influence has been mighty, his name has receded into the shadows.<sup>3</sup>

Among Moreno's visitors at his institute in Beacon, New York, in the 1940s was Theodore R. Sarbin, a young psychologist who had just received his doctorate. Sarbin was strongly attracted to Moreno's ideas about social roles. He also had the advantage of spending the greater part of a postdoctoral year at the University of Chicago, where the spirit of George Herbert Mead was still strong, reinforcing further Sarbin's belief in the power of a social and dramaturgical perspective in the interpretation of human life. Sarbin developed a role-theoretical interpretation of hypnosis and later wrote a critique of so-called mental illnesses based on role theory.

A critical event in Sarbin's professional history is illustrative of the principle that identities are shaped by events in the drama of everyday life. After Sarbin left his clinical practice for an academic position at the University of California at Berkeley, he happened to read an article by Theodore Newcomb entitled "Taking the Role of the Other." He wrote a long letter to Newcomb, detailing his reactions to the article, including some critical comments. Newcomb responded with appreciation. Later, Newcomb suggested to Gardner Lindzey that Sarbin be invited to prepare the chapter on role theory for the *Handbook of Social Psychology*. That chapter effectively established Sarbin as "Mr. Role Theory" within psychology. Another series of dramatic accidents resulted in my coming to study with Sarbin as a graduate student at Berkeley, all unknowing that this confluence of lives would give lasting shape to my own identity and career.<sup>4</sup>

Sarbin has provided a philosophical foundation for a dramaturgical psychology. Following the suggestion of Pepper (1942; see Sarbin 1977), he proposed that the appropriate world hypothesis for psychology is not mechanism, but contextualism.<sup>5</sup> The second foundational concept is that of constructionism—the idea that social objects and categories do not have a natural existence apart from people who create and sustain them (see Sarbin and Kitsuse, eds., 1994). Third, Sarbin has shown that many of psychology's central terms can be seen as fossilized metaphors.<sup>6</sup> Among the dead metaphors that have been subjected to his mission of demythification are hypnotic trance, mental illness, schizophrenia, anxiety, and hallucination (see Sarbin 1950, 1967a, 1967b, 1968; Sarbin and Mancuso 1980).

## COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES

Whether or not one accepts the problematic notion of postmodernism, the present era in psychology is different from the era just past. At the risk of offending some sensibilities and ignoring some major fights, I prefer to think of it as a "post-polemical" era—or to put it more positively, an era of theoretical pluralism.<sup>7</sup>

Freud and Goffman wrote their books at times of major polemical embattlement. Both defined themselves by staking out positions that



were radically different from the prevailing orthodoxy. Freudian psychoanalysis, in turn, became one of the most stultifying and captivating orthodoxies of the twentieth century. Goffman and Moreno before him were to a degree excluded from their respective professional establishments, and their career stories can be told in part as struggles with those establishments.

The arguments about contextualism, constructionism, and demythification have been heard and have had their impact—if only in encouraging a much greater tolerance of divergent theoretical positions than was prevalent earlier in this century. For my present purpose—that of suggesting a proper and fruitful relationship between psychology and drama—all of this precedent has set the stage. This makes it possible for me to articulate a position that is not likely to be offensive or threatening, as it might have been at an earlier time.

Let us say, after William James, that psychology is the “science of mental life”—a science that is fundamentally contextualist and constructionist, the terms of which must be metaphors, recognized as such. I believe that the essence of drama is transformation: seeing one thing as another (envisaging a potato as a human body and toothpicks as arms and legs, seeing puppets and dolls as being like people); or becoming something else (pretending to be a doctor or to be sick or to be deaf, assuming a character, enacting a role).<sup>8</sup>

I see three possible relationships between psychology and drama:

1. Psychology can be viewed as the science that explains or accounts for drama.
2. Drama can be viewed as accounting for psychology, as well as for everything else.
3. Psychology and drama can be viewed as complementary approaches to truth and understanding—at the same conceptual level, with frequent borrowings back and forth.

The first of these positions has been customary within psychology. Freud used his psychology to account not only for the psychopathology of everyday life but also for the artistic creations of da Vinci, the development of religion, the humor in jokes, and the origins and cultural dissemination of Greek myths. Behaviorists were no less ambitious.