

Performative Sociality and Bounded Intimacy in Social Partner Relationships A Goffmanian Perspective

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Abstract

Postmodern society at present is increasingly fragmented in terms of inter-personal communication, functionalised, and emotionally shallow. The old form of a prolonged, emotionally rich relationship is being replaced by a more flexible and convenient relationship based on “mutual consideration”. Among the above new forms, social partner relationships have been particularly prevalent among young people, and they are organised around specific activities such as studying, exercising and consuming, rather than emotional closeness. In accordance with Goffman's dramatic theory, this paper will examine the relationship among social partners and observe how they present themselves to others, handle public attention, and keep their emotions concealed. Based on the above analysis, the relationships among social partners are generally highly formal in nature and are maintained by strict rules for boundary maintenance, emotion control, self-presentation selection and information restriction. Together, these mechanisms have created a kind of “limited closeness” that is both stable and functional, but not intimate. The above results further indicate that the reasons for changes in social partner relationships are also related to the whole society, such as a fast-paced life, digital communication and the need to reduce risk in social interactions. Although the links can provide functions such as reduced loneliness, flexible companionship, and easy social connections, they are also limited in their development of trust and empathy, and a stable long-term relationship cannot be established. They are also too dependent on consistent role performance and thus relatively weak when facing expectation gaps or disruptions to impression management.

Keywords

social partner relationships, dramaturgical theory, impression management, bounded intimacy, contemporary social interaction

1. Introduction

In postmodern society, people's communication methods have undergone a fundamental change, tending towards fragmentation and superficiality. Anger and affection based on deep-rooted, lasting emotional bonds are gradually being replaced by short-lived, instrumental relationships [1]. Another important consequence of this change, especially among young people, is the rise of social partnerships (or Dazi). These relationships are typically functional, built around certain activities, such as academic collaboration, sports activities, or collective consumption. They are not built on emotional intimacy or long-term commitment, but rather established and maintained to meet the needs of specific situations [2]. In such interactions, emotional

investment is strictly controlled: participants tend to maintain a certain distance, not revealing their innermost feelings, not developing emotional dependence, and not expecting the relationship to continue. This relationship model breaks down traditional standards of intimacy and commitment. People no longer pursue strong, emotionally charged relationships, but instead value efficiency, flexibility, and emotional security. In this sense, social partnerships can be seen as a strategic response to the uncertainty and pressures of modern life, where time, attention, and emotional resources are extremely scarce [2]. Therefore, the more general changes in the dynamics of social life are a more utilitarian, lower-risk, and more cost-effective transformation. Interpersonal relationships are no longer the goal itself, but are often instrumentalized as a means to achieve specific objectives, reflecting the increasing rationalization and performativity of everyday social interactions.

Drawing upon Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective [3], this paper adopts his conceptual framework as a methodological lens to deconstruct the strategic formation and maintenance of social partnerships. Rather than viewing these interactions as merely casual, this study interrogates them as highly curated performances. By analyzing the interplay between performance, audience, and role, the research aims to decipher the underlying socio-cognitive mechanisms that govern this nascent social structure. Furthermore, it evaluates how such "low-stakes" relational patterns are reshuffling the broader ecology of modern interpersonal communication, ultimately offering a critical assessment of the trade-offs between social efficiency and emotional depth.

2. Goffman's Dramaturgical Framework and Social Partner Relationships

2.1 Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory believes that life is a kind of drama, and people have different roles in society, and they all work to make a good impression on others. At the centre of this system are the ideas of the front stage and the back stage. The front stage is a place in society that conforms to the customs and social norms of society, and as such, is respected by the people. Conversely, the back stage is a private place where one can let their guard down and be their true self, away from the eyes of the public [4]. Given that these are "social partner" relationships, interaction is mainly restricted to the front stage. Participants engage in a kind of "bounded intimacy" where only attributes relevant to the shared activity are shown, such as academic diligence or fitness motivation, and backstage information and personal vulnerabilities are strictly off-limits [3].

Based on the above spatial division, Goffman later introduced the ideas of impression management (or image construction) and role distance to explain how people operate in society [5]. Impression management is people's intention to manage the information that affects their evaluation of the character of others. In social partnerships, people select parts of themselves to display; they show off their functional abilities but hide sensitive emotional issues to keep the interaction simple and low-maintenance [5]. Role distance also plays a role here, as the distance between one's real self and the role being played is relatively large. By employing a role distance, the social parties consciously indicate that their participation is merely for the occasion. Thus, a protective device has been created to avoid strong emotions in the relationship and keep it at a low-risk level. Together, these dramaturgical features provide rich material for studying the organised, performative and increasingly commodified attributes of contemporary society.

2.2 The Structured Performance of Social Partner Relationships

Based on the dramaturgical system shown above, social partner relations can be regarded as highly organised types of interaction that are continuously performed and regulated [6]. Generally speaking, traditional friendships are more open to emotions, gradually blend the front-stage and back-stage areas, and are relatively stable in certain situations compared with relationships involving social partners. One such feature of the connection is that it is not stable. Participants repeatedly reproduce a small number of behaviours that meet the goals of the relationship, such as maintaining study efficiency in study partnerships or showing enthusiasm for fitness partnerships [6]. Repetitive behaviors offer predictable interaction patterns, making them more convenient. However, this also has limitations. That is, people are not required to express themselves freely but must conform to official positions.

In addition, these relations also have a relatively high degree of boundary maintenance. The distinction between suitable and unsuitable subjects has been made clear, and participants are proactively avoiding entering the area of backstage disclosure, such as personal stress, emotional vulnerability, or interpersonal conflict. The Boundary Work will maintain the interactional order and strengthen the instrumental nature of the relationship.

The time period and extent of the social partner relationship are relatively loose. These connections are often made and broken based on the situation, so there is no commitment to joining or leaving. Although it is convenient, there will be less sense of community and fewer shared memories due to the absence of group activity. Together, the above attributes indicate that social partner relationships are not merely incidental or superficial, but rather subject to hidden rules of behaviour and self-regulation. In light of this, it is clear that these are no longer models for building a new society; rather, they have become ends in themselves.

3. Mechanisms, Causes, and Impacts of Social Partner Relationships

3.1 Mechanisms of Social Partner Interaction

The network of the community will also provide social support for participants in the experiment. These are not due to feelings; rather, they are regular, stable and efficient communication modes that ensure orderliness [7].

The other is the design of a “boundary manager” to set limits on users. Topics that do not serve the purpose of this function will be omitted, such as personal trauma, emotional fragility or long-term life plans. This is closely related to the lack of time constraints, so most relationships are convenient and can be entered and left freely without a long-term commitment [7]. Regulation of Emotions is also required in this study. Participants reduce their emotional investment consciously to maintain a certain level of engagement without becoming too attached or overly concerned. The rule of free will also supports this division; thus, when a person is no longer required for work, their contract ends relatively easily.

At a more implicit level, the above interactions are continuously driven by persona standardisation, affective regulation and information control. People use socially acceptable “templates” of behaviour suitable for the context, keep a consistently positive or neutral emotional expression, and strictly limit the disclosure of personal information. Together, the above mechanisms have achieved a relatively stable but intentionally shallow form of social coordination.

3.2 Social and Structural Reasons

These are not accidental, but rather the result of broader social changes. One reason is the fast pace of modern life; long working hours leave people with little time for other things, making it difficult to maintain long-term romantic relationships [2]. At the same time, while the proliferation of digital and social media has increased opportunities for people to connect, it has also diminished the depth of interpersonal relationships [8].

The shift to a social model is not confined to this area; rather, it is an urgent need that has emerged due to the alterations in society caused by the digital age. With the development of the Internet, people's attention and emotional energy are becoming scarcer resources according to Herbert Simon [9]. Due to the high-information environment today, people need to choose efficiency over rich communication and are thus adopting a more rational-choice approach to their social interactions[10]. A typical case is the development of a “partner-seeking” culture on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Reddit, and many specific functions of life are organized in this way. People no longer need all-encompassing “friends”; they only wish to find a “dining partner” or a “study companion”. By meeting only these specific social needs, they can reduce the “cognitive load” and emotional stress of traditional friendships and choose convenience and utility over long-term emotional investment.

In recent years, as uncertainty has spread throughout society, many people have begun to adopt a strategy of “emotional hedging.” Ulrich Beck refers to this as a “Risk Society,” and with the collapse of old forms of stability, most relationships today are viewed as high-risk investments that may lead to “emotional burnout [11].” Young professionals face unstable job markets and other high-pressure circumstances, so they often feel

that the risk of a deep relationship collapsing due to relocation or changes in work cannot be ignored. Therefore, social partnerships have begun to appear as a practical way to cope, offering a form of “presence without pressure”. For example, “Study with Me” live-streamings or co-working spaces are popular because people feel a sense of solidarity and mutual monitoring without having to reveal their lives. By distributing various social needs among several low-pressure partners, one can maintain a sense of being socially connected and prevent feelings of loneliness by keeping their “backstage” life away from vulnerable emotional displays.

3.3 The Impact of Social Partnerships

Social partner relationships have shown good functions and structural defects in modern society. On the positive side, the above relationships offer people a convenient way to satisfy their basic social needs given their limited time, energy and emotional resources [12]. Rather than demanding extended emotional investment, they are convenient sources of company that can reduce loneliness without the necessity of close-knit relationships. They are also relatively flexible and can be used by different people with different interests, goals or activities. It will be a more flexible system that requires less coordination and is less rigid in its operation. Therefore, given the limitations imposed by life in the modern era, the above types of social groups have begun to appear.

This approach also has some drawbacks. Excessive functional and emotional investment may hinder the formation of deep, lasting connections. Because such relationships are built on low levels of commitment and deliberate self-presentation, it is difficult to build trust and cultivate empathy over time.

Furthermore, these relationship structures are fragile and highly sensitive to changes in expectations and imbalances in interaction. Since the stability of the relationship depends on role consistency and normative self-presentation, any deviation from these unwritten rules can lead to premature breakdown. For example, one party may increase their emotional needs, or impression management may fail. Therefore, these relationships are often conditional and temporary, rather than permanent or lasting social bonds.

4. Recommendations and Implications

The emergence of social partner relationships shows a general change in modern social life, which is more efficient, flexible and emotionally restrained. Although this type of interaction meets people's current needs, it is also lacking in keeping warm relationships for a long time.

At the individual level, one needs to cultivate an awareness of the deficiencies in overly organised, high-pressure relationships. Knowing that such behaviour is often a result of selective self-presentation and emotional regulation, one can better consider their own hopes for others and how to interact. It does not mean rejecting the idea of a social partner, but rather knowing the functional limitations of such a role and not depending on it excessively to cover for an absence of other emotional support.

Digitally enabled platforms for matching will also need to consider adding design features that promote prolonged and meaningful interactions at the structural level. Efficiency and convenience are still required; however, some mechanisms to gradually build trust and more balanced forms of participation should also be introduced, not solely task-oriented links.

In the future, more research will be carried out to study the extended effects on mental health and social life of social partner relations. More research will be carried out in the future on the impact of extended participation in less demanding social connections on emotional development, feelings of social trust, and the capacity to build close bonds over an extended period. Longitudinal and comparative studies can be carried out to determine whether such interaction patterns are stable forms of adaptation to modern life or transitional stages in changing social structures.

5. Conclusion

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical system has been used to study the development of social partner relationships in contemporary society in this paper. Based on the above results, these relationships are not merely accidental or random; rather, they are highly structured and performative social arrangements that have been regulated by boundary regulation, impression management and role-based interaction. In this relationship,

most people only perform in a “front stage” and are not allowed to disclose their lives “backstage”. As a result, the type of closeness is relatively superficial; functionality takes precedence over deep affection, and people tend to be less emotional.

Research has further shown that with the rise of social partner relationships, there have been wider structural changes in modern society, such as a faster pace of life, more digital mediation of social interaction, and an increased risk-avoidance tendency in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, the relationship of social partners can be viewed as a reasonable adjustment to current social conditions, offering flexible and low-cost forms of companionship in line with the demands of fragmented living. There are some other defects as well. Although the above links are simple and emotionally touching, they may also fail to foster a sense of trust and empathy, and thus do not form an intimate connection over a long period. Due to a lack of open self-expression and infrequent low-risk interactions, the resulting relationships are unstable and require all parties to constantly maintain them.

This study also has some limitations. First, the study is only in terms of theory and interpretation, and no primary data were collected for empirical verification. Second, the idea of social partnership has been studied relatively little in theory, and there are also differences across cultures and generations; therefore, this study may lack generalizability. In the future, an empirical and long-term study will be conducted on the impact of continuous participation in such relational forms on emotional growth, social trust and interpersonal stability over an extended period. Research abroad could also be used to determine whether the relationship between social partners is a common feature of contemporary socialisation in all societies or a localised manifestation that adapts differently under specific economic and social conditions.

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Conflicts of Interest

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