“‘Popping the Question’ When the Answer is Known”
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Method: interviews with engaged couples.

This paper draws upon Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective to analyze the engagement proposal as a performance.

Key findings/claims:

The proposal is a double performance, put on first for the woman and then for the secondary audience of family and friends.

During the secondary performance, the story of the proposal and the ring are two key pieces of evidence that establish that the couple is engaged.

Success in the proposal relies upon using several standard elements; the man does the proposing, a diamond ring is presented, the man gets down on one knee, the man asks permission of the woman’s father (and mother), and the proposal is a surprise.

A successful proposal sends messages about the performer (I am a worthy fiancé), the situation (this is an engagement proposal) and the team (we should be married). A botched performance can screw up any of these messages.

The woman works backstage to plan the proposal before becoming the audience. The proposal is planned and expected, but the time, place and manner are a surprise.

Unlike romantic events organized by women, the proposal is fairly simple to put on.

The proposal is organized around ideas about the sexes—man is initiator, chooser and money maker/spender; woman is passive and chosen.

However, couples don’t attribute sex-specific messages to their own relationships or to their ideologies. (The proposal is “traditional.”) The standard script may obscure the couple’s actual sex roles.