

Embarrassment and the Analysis of Role Requirements¹

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ABSTRACT

Since embarrassment incapacitates persons for continued role performance, it can provide an indicator of basic requirements of role performance. Study of one thousand instances of recalled embarrassment revealed three major requirements: identity, poise, and confidence in established identity and poise. The analysis of identity reveals the significance of adjunct roles and reserve and relict identities. Disturbances of poise revolve about the handling of spaces, props, equipment, clothing, and the body. Violations of confidence are prevented by performance norms. Finally, deliberate embarrassment is shown to have major social functions.

Attitudes, in the view of George Herbert Mead, are incipient acts. Meaningful discourse requires that discussants take one another's attitudes—incorporate one another's incipient activities—in their conversation. Since all social transactions are marked by meaningful communication, discursive or not, whenever people come together, they bring futures into one another's presence. They are ready, balanced, *poised* for the upcoming discussion. The discussion, of course, remands futures to a momentary present, where they are always somewhat inexactly realized, and relegates them in their altered form to the collective past we call memory. New futures are constantly built up in discussions. Indeed, they must be, else the discussion is over and the transaction is ended. Without a future, there is nothing else to be done, nothing left to say. Every social transaction, therefore, requires that the participants be poised at the outset and that poise be maintained as the transaction unfolds, until there is an accord that each can turn to

other things and carry other futures away to other circles.

Poise is not enough. The futures that are presented, imperfectly realized, and re-established must be relevant. Relevance is achieved by establishing the *identities* of those who are caught up in the transaction. Futures or attitudes are anchored in identities. We speak of *role* as consensual attitudes mobilized by an announced and ratified identity. In social transactions, then, persons must announce who they are to enable each one to ready himself with reference to appropriate futures, providing attitudes which others may take or assume. Often announced identities are complementary, establishing the transaction as a social relationship, for many identities presuppose counteridentities. Whether or not this is the case, the maintenance of one's identity assists the maintenance of the other.²

¹ Revision of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, April, 1963.

² Alfred R. Lindesmith and Anselm L. Strauss assert that *every* role presupposes a counter-role. There is a sense in which the assertion is correct, as in Kenneth Burke's "paradox of substance," but it may also be somewhat misleading in sociological

Furthermore, all transactions are transactions through time. It is not enough that identity and poise be established. They must be continuously reaffirmed, maintained, and provisions made for their repair in case of breakdown. Role performers count on this. We attempt here to limn the structure of transactions by examining instances where identities have been misplaced or forgotten, where poise has been lost or destroyed, or where, for any reason, confidence that identities and poise will be maintained has been undermined. We have in mind instances of embarrassment, whether or not deliberately perpetrated.

EMBARRASSMENT AND THE ANALYSIS OF ROLE REQUIREMENTS

Embarrassment exaggerates the core dimensions of social transactions, bringing them to the eye of the observer in an almost naked state. Embarrassment occurs whenever some *central* assumption in a transaction has been *unexpectedly* and unqualifiedly discredited for at least one participant. The result is that he is incapacitated for continued role performance.³ Moreover, embarrassment is infectious. It may spread out, incapacitating others not previously incapacitated. It is destructive dis-ease. In the wreckage left by embarrassment lie the broken foundations of social transactions. By examining such ruins, the investigator can reconstruct the architecture they represent.

To explore this idea, recollections of embarrassment were expressly solicited from two groups of subjects: (1) approximately

800 students enrolled in introductory sociology courses; and (2) about 80 students enrolled in an evening extension class. Not solicited, but gratefully received, were many examples volunteered by colleagues and friends who had heard of our interest in the subject. Finally we drew upon many recollections of embarrassment we had experienced ourselves. Through these means at least one thousand specimens of embarrassment were secured.

We found that embarrassments frequently occurred in situations requiring continuous and co-ordinated role performance—speeches, ceremonies, processions, or working concerts. In such situations embarrassment is particularly noticeable because it is so devastating. Forgetting one's lines, forgetting the wedding ring, stumbling in a cafeteria line, or handing a colleague the wrong tool, when these things occur without qualification, bring the performance to an obviously premature and unexpected halt. At the same time, manifestations of the embarrassment—blushing, fumbling, stuttering, sweating⁴—coerce awareness of the social damage and the need for immediate repair. In some instances, the damage may be potentially so great that embarrassment cannot be allowed to spread among the role performers. The incapacity may be qualified, totally ignored, or pretended out of existence.⁵ For example, a minister, noting the best man's frantic search for an absent wedding ring, whispers to him to ignore it, and all conspire to continue the drama with an imaginary ring. Such rescues are not always

analysis. Specifically, there is a role of cigarette smoker, but the role is not really dependent for its establishment on the counter-role of non-smoker in the sense that the parental role is dependent upon child roles and vice versa. Thus, in some social transactions the establishment and maintenance of one identity may be very helpful for the establishment and maintenance of a counter-identity; in other transactions, this may not be the case at all (see Lindesmith and Strauss, *Social Psychology* [New York: Dryden Press, 1956], pp. 379–80; and Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* [New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945], pp. 21–58).

³ Not all incapacitated persons are always embarrassed or embarrassing, because others have come to expect their *incapacities* and are consequently prepared for them.

⁴ Erving Goffman, in "Embarrassment and Social Organization," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXII (November, 1956), 264–71, describes these manifestations vividly.

⁵ A more general discussion of this phenomenon, under the rubric civil inattention is provided in Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963), pp. 83–88 and *passim*.

possible. Hence we suggest that every enduring social relation will provide means of preventing embarrassment, so that the entire transaction will not collapse when embarrassment occurs. A second general observation would take into account that some stages in the life cycle, for example, adolescence in our society, generate more frequent embarrassments than others. These are points to which we shall return.

To get at the content of embarrassment, we classified the instances in categories that remained as close to the specimens as possible. A total of seventy-four such categories were developed, some of which were forced choices between friends, public mistakes, exposure of false front, being caught in a cover story, misnaming, forgetting names, slips of the tongue, body exposure, invasions of others' back regions, uncontrollable laughter, drunkenness in the presence of sobriety (or vice versa), loss of visceral control, and the sudden recognition of wounds or other stigmata. Further inspection of these categories disclosed that most could be included in three general areas: (1) inappropriate identity; (2) loss of poise; (3) disturbance of the assumptions persons make about one another in social transactions.

Since embarrassment always incapacitates persons for role performance (to embarrass is, literally, to bar or stop), a close analysis of the conditions under which it occurs is especially fruitful in the revelation of the requirements *necessary* for role-playing, role-taking, role-making, and role performance in general. These role requirements are thus seen to include the establishment of identity, poise, and valid assumptions about one another among all the parties of a social transaction. We turn now to the analysis of those role requirements.

IDENTITY AND POISE

In every social transaction, selves must be established, defined, and accepted by the parties. Every person in the company of others is, in a sense, obligated to bring his best self forward to meet the selves of

others also presumably best fitted to the occasion. When one is "not himself" in the presence of others who expect him to be just that, as in cases where his mood carries him away either by spontaneous seizure (uncontrollable laughter or tears) or by induced seizure (drunkenness), embarrassment ensues. Similarly, when one is "shown up" to other parties to the transaction by the exposure of unacceptable moral qualifications or inappropriate motives, embarrassment sets in all around. However, the concept, self, is a rather gross concept, and we wish to single out two phases that frequently provided focal points for embarrassment—identity and poise.⁶

Identity.—Identity is the substantive dimension of the self.

Almost all writers using the term imply that identity establishes what and where the person is in social terms. It is not a substitute word for "self." Instead, when one has identity, he is *situated*—that is, cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation or membership in social relations. One's identity is established when others *place* him as a social object by assigning the same words of identity that he appropriates for himself or *announces*. It is in the coincidence of placements and announcements that identity becomes a meaning of the self.⁷

Moreover, as we have already pointed out, identity stands at the base of role. When inappropriate identities are established or appropriate identities are lost, role performance is impossible.

If identity *locates* the person in social terms, it follows that locations or spaces emerge as symbols of identity, since social relations are spatially distributed. Moreover, as Goffman has remarked,⁸ there must be a certain coherence between one's per-

⁶ Other dimensions of the self—value and mood—will be taken up in subsequent publications.

⁷ Gregory P. Stone, "Appearance and the Self," in Arnold Rose (ed.), *Human Behavior and Social Processes* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1962), p. 93.

⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 25.

sonal appearance and the setting in which he appears. Otherwise embarrassment may ensue with the resulting incapacitation for role performance. Sexual identity is pervasively established by personal appearance, and a frequent source of embarrassment among our subjects was the presence of one sex in a setting reserved for the other. Both men and women reported inadvertent invasions of spaces set aside for the other sex with consequent embarrassment and humiliation. The implication of such inadvertent invasions is, of course, that one literally does not know where one is, that one literally has no identity in the situation, or that the identity one is putting forward is so absurd as to render the proposed role performance totally irrelevant. Everyone is embarrassed, and such manifestations as, for example, cries and screams, heighten the dis-ease. In such situations, laughter cannot be enjoined to reduce the seriousness of the unexpected collapse of the encounter, and only flight can insure that one will not be buried in the wreckage.

To establish *what* he is in social terms, each person assembles a set of apparent⁹ symbols which he carries about as he moves from transaction to transaction. Such symbols include the shaping of the hair, painting of the face, clothing, cards of identity, other contents of wallets and purses, and sundry additional marks and ornaments. The items in the set must cohere, and the set must be complete. Taken together, these apparent symbols have been called *identity documents*,¹⁰ in that they enable others to validate announced identities.

⁹ We use the term "appearance" to designate that dimension of a social transaction given over to identifications of the participants. Apparent symbols are those symbols used to communicate such identifications. They are often non-verbal. Appearance seems, to us, a more useful term than Goffman's "front" (*ibid.*), which in everyday speech connotes misrepresentation.

¹⁰ Erving Goffman, *Stigma* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 59–62. Goffman confines the concept to personal identity, but his own discussion extends it to include matters of social identity.

Embarrassment often resulted when our subjects made personal appearances with either invalid or incomplete identity documents. It was embarrassing for many, for example, to announce their identities as customers at restaurants or stores, perform the customer role and then, when the crucial validation of this identity was requested—the payoff—to discover that the wallet had been left at home.

Because the social participation of men in American society is relatively more frequently caught up in the central structures, for example, the structure of work, than is the social participation of women who are relatively more immersed in interpersonal relations, the identities put forward by men are often *titles*; by women, often *names*. Except for very unusual titles,¹¹ such identities are shared, and their presentation has the consequence of bringing people together. Names, on the other hand, mark people off from one another. So it is that a frequent source of embarrassment for women in our society occurs when they appear together in precisely the same dress. Their identity documents are invalidated. The embarrassment may be minimized, however, if the space in which they make their personal appearance is large enough. In one instance, both women met the situation by spending an entire evening on different sides of the ballroom in which their embarrassing confrontation occurred, attempting to secure validation from social circles with minimal intersection, or, at least, where intersection was temporally attenuated. Men, on the other hand, will be embarrassed if their clothing does not resemble the dress of the other men present in public and official encounters. Except for "the old school tie," their neckties seem to serve as numbers on a uniform, marking each man off from every other. Out of uni-

¹¹ For example, the title, "honorary citizen of the United States," which was conferred on Winston Churchill, serves the function of a name, since Churchill is the only living recipient of the title. Compare the titles, "professor," "manager," "punch-press operator," and the like.

form, their structural membership cannot be visibly established, and role performance is rendered extremely difficult, if not impossible.¹²

Not only are identities undocumented, they are also misplaced, as in misnaming or forgetting, or other incomplete placements. One relatively frequent source of embarrassment we categorized as "damaging someone's personal representation." This included cases of ethnically colored sneers in the presence of one who, in fact, belonged to the deprecated ethnic group but did not put that identity forward, or behind-the-back slurs about a woman who turned out to be the listener's wife. The victim of such misplacement, however inadvertent, will find it difficult to continue the transaction or to present the relevant identity to the perpetrators of the embarrassment in the future. The awkwardness is reflexive. Those who are responsible for the misplacement will experience the same difficulties and dis-ease.

Other sources of embarrassment anchored in identity suggest a basic characteristic of all human transactions, which, as Strauss puts it, are "carried on in thickly peopled and complexly imaged contexts."¹³ One always brings to transactions more identities than are necessary for his role performance. As a consequence, two or more roles are usually performed at once by each participant.¹⁴

If we designate the relevant roles in transactions as *dominant roles*¹⁵ then we may note that *adjunct roles*—a type of side involvement, as Goffman would have it,¹⁶

or better, a type of side *activity*—are usually performed in parallel with dominant role performance. Specifically, a lecturer may smoke cigarettes or a pipe while carrying out the dominant performance, or one may carry on a heated conversation with a passenger while operating a motor vehicle. Moreover, symbols of *reserve identities* are often carried into social transactions. Ordinarily, they are concealed, as when a court judge wears his golfing clothes beneath his robes. Finally, symbols of abandoned or *relict identities* may persist in set-

¹⁴ This observation and the ensuing discussion constitute a contribution to and extension of present perspectives on role conflict. Most discussions conceive of such conflict as internalized contradictory obligations. They do not consider simultaneous multiple-role performances. An exception is Everett C. Hughes' discussion of the Negro physician innocently summoned to attend a prejudiced emergency case in "Dilemmas and Contradictions in Status," *American Journal of Sociology*, L (March, 1945), 353–59.

¹⁵ We have rewritten this discussion to relate to Goffman's classification which came to our attention after we had prepared an earlier version of this article. Goffman distinguishes between what people do in transactions and what the situation calls for. He recognizes that people do many things at once in their encounters and distinguishes those activities that command most of their attention and energies from those which are less demanding of energy and time. Here, the distinction is made between *main* and *side involvements*. On the other hand, situations often call for multiple activities. Those which are central to the situation, Goffman speaks of as *dominant involvements*; others are called *subordinate involvements*. Dominant roles, therefore, are those that are central to the transactional situation—what the participants have come together to do (see Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, pp. 43–59).

¹⁶ Adjunct roles are one type of side involvement or activity. We focus on them because we are concerned here with identity difficulties. There are other side *activities* which are *not* necessarily adjunct *roles*, namely, sporadic nose-picking, scratching, coughing, sneezing, or stomach growling, which are relevant to matters of embarrassment, but not to the conceptualization of the problem in these terms. Of course, such activities, insofar as they are consistently proposed and anticipated, may become incorporated in the *personal role* (always an adjunct role in official transactions), as in the case of Billy Gilbert, the fabulous sneezer.

¹² The implication of the discussion is that structured activities are uniformed, while interpersonal activities emphasize individuation in dress. Erving Goffman suggests, in correspondence, that what may be reflected here is the company people keep in their transactions. The work of men in our society is ordinarily teamwork, and teams are uniformed, but housework performed by a wife is solitary work and does not require a uniformed appearance, though the "housedress" might be so regarded.

¹³ Anselm L. Strauss, *Mirrors and Masks* (Glen-coe, Ill.: Free Press, 1959), p. 57.

tings where they have no relevance for dominant role performances.¹⁷ For example, photographs of the performer as an infant may be thrust into a transaction by a doting mother or wife, or one's newly constituted household may still contain the symbols of a previous marriage.

In these respects, the probability of avoiding embarrassment is a function of at least two factors: (1) the extent to which adjunct roles, reserve identities and relict identities are not incongruent with the dominant role performance;¹⁸ and (2) the allocation of prime attention to the dominant role performance so that less attention is directed toward adjunct role performance, reserve identities, and relict identities. Thus the professor risks embarrassment should the performance of his sex role appear to be the main activity in transactions with female students where the professorial role is dominant—for example, if the student pulls her skirt over her knees with clearly more force than necessary. The judge may not enter the courtroom in a golf cap, nor may the husband dwell on the symbols of a past marriage in the presence of a new wife while entertaining guests in his home. Similarly, should adjunct role performance prove inept, as when the smoking lecturer ignites the contents of a wastebasket or the argumentative driver fails to observe the car in front in time to avert a collision, attention is diverted from the dominant role performance. Even without the golf cap, should the judge's robe be caught so that his golfing attire is suddenly revealed in the courtroom, the transactions of the court will be disturbed. Fetishistic devotion to the symbols of relict identities by bereaved persons is embarrassing even to well-meaning visitors.

However, the matter of avoiding incongruence and allocating attention appropriately among the several identities a performer brings to a transaction verges

very closely on matters of poise, as we shall see. Matters of poise converge on the necessity of controlling representations of the self, and identity-symbols are important self-representations.

Personal poise.—Presentation of the self in social transactions extends considerably beyond making the appropriate personal appearance. It includes the presentation of an entire situation. Components of situations, however, are often representations of self, and in this sense self and situation are two sides of the same coin. Personal poise refers to the performer's control over self and situation, and whatever disturbs that control, depriving the transaction, as we have said before, of any relevant future, is incapacitating and consequently embarrassing.

Loss of poise was a major dimension in our scrutiny of embarrassment, and its analysis can do much to shed light on the components of social situations—a necessary task, because the concept, "situation," is quite difficult to specify and operationalize. Working from the outside in, so to speak, we wish to single out five¹⁹ elements of self and situation with reference to which loss of control gave rise to considerable embarrassment.

First, *spaces* must be so arranged and maintained that they are role-enabling. This is sometimes difficult to control, since people appear in spaces that belong to others, over which they exercise no authority and for which they are not responsible. Students, invited to faculty parties where faculty members behave like faculty members, will "tighten up" to the extent that the students' role performance is seriously impeded. To avoid embarrassment, people

¹⁸ Adjunct roles, reserve identities, and relict identities need not cohere with the dominant role; they simply must not clash so that the attention of participants in a transaction is not completely diverted from the dominant role performance.

¹⁹ The five components to be discussed—spaces, props, equipment, clothing, and the body—are not offered as an exhaustive list. We have been able to distinguish close to forty such elements.

¹⁷ This phenomenon provides the main theme and source of horror and mystery in Daphne du Maurier's now classic *Rebecca*.

will go to great lengths to insure their appearance in appropriate places, and to some to be deprived of access to a particular setting is to limit performance drastically.

Spaces are often fixed in location and have boundaries. As such they may partake of the character of territories or domains: a particular person (or persons) is "in command" (it is "his" domain) and most familiar with it, and the territory is in continual danger of being invaded (deliberately or inadvertently). Embarrassments were reported for both of these features of space. Being "in command" and familiar with an area means knowing where the back regions are and having the right of access to them. The host at a party in his own home, however much he may be vanishing,²⁰ is at least the person in whose territory the gathering takes place. Should a guest spill food on his clothes, he has no choice but to suffer embarrassment for the remainder of the party. The host, by contrast, can retire to his bedroom and change his clothes quickly, often before the momentary loss of poise becomes known. A striking case of the man "in command" of a territory is the person delivering a speech to a fixed audience in a closed room. In being presented to the audience, he may even be told, "The floor is yours." To underline his exclusive domain, the speaker may wait until waiters clear the last table of cups and saucers and the doors are closed. In such a setting, where the audience is not free to leave, the speaker is now in great danger of embarrassing his audience unless his speech is such that the audience is not let down. Should he show lack of poise, the audience will feel embarrassed for him, yet be unable to escape, for that would further embarrass him. Hence they will suffer silently, hoping for a short speech.

In a situation reported to us, the discussant at a professional meeting was able

to save the situation. The speaker was a man of national reputation—one of the pillars of his discipline. To everyone's dismay and embarrassment, he proceeded to give a pedestrian address of the caliber of an undergraduate term essay. Everyone hoped the discussant would save them, and he did. His tactic was to make clear to the audience that the identity presented by the speaker was not his real identity. This result he accomplished by reminding the audience of the major contributions of the speaker, by claiming the paper presented must be interpreted as evidence that the speaker was still productive, and that all could expect even more important contributions in the future. When the audience thundered applause, they were not simply expressing their agreement with the discussant's appraisal of the speaker: they were also thanking him for saving them all from embarrassment by putting the speaker back in command of the territory.

We have already touched upon problems presented by invasions of spaces, and little more need be said. Persons lose poise when they discover they are in places forbidden to them, for the proscription itself means they have no identity there and hence cannot act. They can do little except withdraw quickly. It is interesting that children are continually invading the territories of others—who can control the course of a sharply hit baseball?—and part of the process of socialization consists of indications of the importance of boundaries. Whether territories are crevice or contrived affects the possibility of invasion. When they are contrived and boundaries are marked, the invader knows he has crossed the boundary and is embarrassed if caught. With crevice territories inadvertent invasions occur, as when a tourist reports discovery of a "quaint" area of the city only to be met with the sly smiles of those who know that the area is the local prostitution region.

Such considerations raise questions concerning both how boundaries are defined and how boundary violations may be pre-

²⁰ David Riesman, Robert J. Potter, and Jeanne Watson, "The Vanishing Host," *Human Organization*, XIX (Spring, 1960), 17–21.

vented. Walls provide physical limits, but do not necessarily prevent communications from passing through.²¹ Hence walls work best when there is also tacit agreement to ignore audible communication on the other side of the wall. Embarrassment frequently occurs when persons on one side of the wall learn that intimate matters have been communicated to persons on the other side. A common protective device is for the captive listeners to become very quiet so that their receipt of the communication will not be discovered by the unsuspecting intimates. When no physical boundaries are present, a group gathered in one section of a room may have developed a common mood which is bounded by a certain space that defines the limits of their engagement to one another. The entry of someone new may be followed by an embarrassed hush. It is not necessary that the group should have been talking about that person. Rather, since moods take time to build up, it will take time for the newcomer to "get with it" and it may not be worth the group's trouble to "fill him in." However unintentionally, he has destroyed a mood that took some effort to build up and he will suffer for it, if only by being stared at or by an obvious change of subject. In some cases, when the mood is partially sustained by alcohol, one can prepare the newcomer immediately for the mood by loud shouts that the group is "three drinks ahead" of him and by thrusting a drink into his hand without delay. So, too, a function of foyers, halls, anterooms, and other buffer zones or decompression chambers around settings is to prepare such newcomers and hence reduce the likelihood of their embarrassing both themselves and those inside.

Spaces, then, include bounded areas within which transactions go on. The boundaries may be more or less sharply defined, that is, walled in or marked off by the distances that separate one encounter from another. Overstepping the

²¹ See Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places*, pp. 151–52.

bounds is a source of embarrassment, signaling a loss of poise. Consequently, the boundaries are usually controlled and patrolled and come to represent the selves of those who are authorized to cross them.

A second component of self and situation that must be controlled to maintain poise is here designated *props*. Props are arranged around settings in an orderly manner commonly called *décor*. Ordinarily they are not moved about during a transaction, except as emergencies arise, to facilitate the movement of people about the setting and to protect the props from damage. In some cases, their adherence to settings is guaranteed by law. Wall-to-wall carpeting, mirrors attached to walls, and curtain fixtures, for example, may not be removed from houses, even though ownership of such domestic settings may change hands. The arrangement of less adhesive props within a setting may mark off or suggest (as in the case of "room dividers") smaller subsettings facilitating the division of large assemblies into more intimate circles. Moreover, although props are ordinarily not moved about *during* transactions, they are typically rearranged or replaced between major changes of scene, marking off changes in life situations.²²

Perhaps just because of their intimate connection with the life situations of those who control them,²³ loss of control over

²² David Riesman and Howard Roseborough, in a discussion of family careers, indicate the linkage between the rearrangement of props and the rearrangement of life situations: "One of our Kansas City respondents, whose existence had been wrapped up in her daughters' social life, when asked what she did when the daughters married and moved away, said that she slept more—and redecorated the living room. Still another became more active in church work—and redecorated the vestry" ("Careers and Consumer Behavior," in Lincoln Clark [ed.], *Consumer Behavior*, Vol. II: *The Life Cycle and Consumer Behavior* [New York: New York University Press, 1955], p. 14).

²³ Striking examples are provided by Harvey W. Zorbaugh in Ernest W. Burgess (ed.), *The Urban Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), pp. 103–4; and in Anonymous, *Street-Walker* (New York: Gramercy Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 46–48.

props is a more frequent (though usually milder) source of embarrassment than the violation of boundaries. When one stumbles over his own furniture or slips on his own throw rug, doubt may be cast on the extent to which such props represent, in fact, the self and situation of the person or team members who have arranged them. Gifts of props are frequently embarrassing to the recipients. Thus an artist (or would-be artist) may foist a painting on a friend without recognizing that the painting is contrary to the recipient's aesthetic taste. Moreover, the artist may expect that his work will be given a prominent display commensurate with his investment. A conflict is immediately established between loyalty to the artist-friend and loyalty to the recipient's self. A way out is to include the prop in question only in those situations where the donor is present, but this may become tedious, depending on the frequency and scheduling of visiting. A classic case is the wealthy relative's gift of a self-photograph, which must be dragged out of the closet for display when the relative visits.

Clashing differences in domestic décor will usually terminate or restrict house-to-house visiting. Because of this, many wartime friendships have been abruptly ended shortly after the cessation of hostilities and demobilization. In a common military setting, servicemen would meet and become close friends, sometimes building up life-and-death obligations to one another. They would eagerly anticipate extending their hard-won intimacy into the workaday world of peacetime. Then, when they met in one or the other's home, the glaring incompatibility in décor would silently signal an incompatibility in life situation. Such embarrassing confrontations would be covered over with empty promises and futile vows to meet again, and the former friends would part as embarrassed strangers. If incompatibilities in décor can bring about the estrangement of friends who owe their lives to one another, we can see how props and their arrangement become pow-

erful guaranties of the exclusiveness of social circles and status strata.

Much of our earlier discussion of adjunct roles, reserve identities, and relict identities applies to props. The porcelain dinnerware may always be kept visibly in reserve for special guests, and this very fact may be embarrassing to some dinner guests who are reminded that they are not so special after all, while, for other guests, anything but the everyday props would be embarrassing. Relict props also present a potential for embarrassment, persisting as they do when one's new life-situation has made them obsolete. The table at which a woman used to sit while dining with a former husband is obviously still quite serviceable, but it is probably best to buy another.

Third, every social transaction requires the manipulation of *equipment*. If props are ordinarily stationary during encounters, equipment is typically moved about, handled, or touched.²⁴ Equipment can range from words to physical objects, and a loss of control over such equipment is a frequent source of embarrassment. Here are included slips of the tongue, sudden dumbness when speech is called for, stalling cars in traffic, dropping bowling balls, spilling food, and tool failures. Equipment appear-

²⁴ Whether objects in a situation are meant to be moved, manipulated, or taken up provides an important differentiating dimension between equipment on the one hand and props (as well as clothing, to be discussed shortly) on the other. Equipment is meant to be moved, manipulated, or taken up *during* a social transaction whereas clothing and props are expected to remain unchanged during a social transaction but will be moved, manipulated, or taken up *between* social transactions. To change props, as in burning the portrait of an old girl friend (or to change clothes, as in taking off a necktie), signals a change in the situation. The special case of the strip-tease dancer is no exception, for her act transforms clothes into equipment. The reference above to the "stickiness" of props may now be seen as another way of describing the fact that they are not moved, manipulated, or taken up during transactions, but remain unchanged for the course of the transaction. Clothing is equally sticky but the object to which it sticks differs. Clothing sticks to the body; props stick to the settings.

ances that cast doubt on the adequacy of control are illustrated by the clanking motor, the match burning down to the fingers, tarnished silverware, or rusty work tools. Equipment sometimes extends beyond what is actually handled in the transaction to include the stage props. Indeed, items of equipment in disuse, reserve equipment, often become props—the Cadillac in the driveway or the silver service on the shelf—and there is a point at which the objects used or scheduled for use in a situation are both equipment and props. At one instant, the items of a table setting lie immobile as props; at the next, they are taken up and transformed into equipment. The close linkage of equipment and props may be responsible for the fact that *embarrassment* at times not only *infects* the participants in the transaction but the *objects* as well. For example, at a formal dinner, a speaker was discovered with his fly zipper undone. On being informed of this embarrassing oversight after he was reseated, he proceeded to make the requisite adjustments, unknowingly catching the table cloth in his trousers. When obliged to rise again at the close of the proceedings, he took the stage props with him and of course scattered the dinner tools about the setting in such a way that others were forced to doubt his control. His poise was lost in the situation.

Just as props may be adjunct to the dominant role performance, held in reserve, or relict, so may equipment. Indeed, as we have said, reserve equipment is often an important part of décor.

Fourth, *clothing* must be maintained, controlled, and coherently arranged. Its very appearance must communicate this. Torn clothing, frayed cuffs, stained neckties, and unpolished shoes are felt as embarrassing in situations where they are expected to be untorn, neat, clean, and polished. Clothing is of special importance since, as William James observed,²⁵ it is as much a part of the self as the body—

²⁵ William James, *Psychology* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1892), pp. 177–78.

a part of what he called the “material me.” Moreover, since it is so close to the body, it conveys the impression of body maintenance, paradoxically, by concealing body-maintenance activities.²⁶ Hence, the double wrap—outer clothes and underclothes. Underclothes bear the marks of body maintenance and tonic state, and their unexpected exposure is a frequent source of embarrassment. The broken brassière strap sometimes produces a shift in appearance that few women (or men, for that matter) will fail to perceive as embarrassing.

Fifth, the *body* must always be in a state of readiness to act, and its appearance must make this clear. Hence any evidence of unreadiness or clumsiness is embarrassing. Examples include loss of whole body control (stumbling, trembling, or fainting), loss of visceral control (flatulence, involuntary urination, or drooling), and the communication of other “signs of the animal.” The actress who is photographed from her “bad side” loses poise, for it shakes the foundation on which her fame rests. So does the person who is embarrassed about pimples, warts, or missing limbs, as well as those embarrassed in his presence.

Ordinarily, persons will avoid recognizing such stigmata, turn their eyes away, and pretend them out of existence, but on occasion stigmata will obtrude upon the situation causing embarrassment all around. A case in point was a minor flirtation reported by one of our students. Seated in a library a short distance from a beautiful girl, the student began the requisite gestural invitation to a more intimate conversation. The girl turned, smiling, to acknowledge the bid, revealing an amputated left arm. Our student’s gestural line was brought to a crashing halt. Embarrassed, he abandoned the role he was building even before the foundation was

²⁶ A complete exposition of the body-maintenance function of clothing is set forth in an advertisement for Jockey briefs, entitled: “A Frank Discussion: What Wives Should Know about Male Support,” *Good Housekeeping*, May, 1963, p. 237.

laid, pretending that his inviting gestures were directed toward some imaginary audience suggested by his reading. Such stigmata publicize body-maintenance activities, and, when they are established in social transactions, interfere with role performances. The pimples on the face of the job applicant cast doubt on his maturity, and, consequently, on his qualifications for any job requiring such maturity.

All this is to say that self and situation must be in a perpetual condition of poise or readiness, adequately maintained, and in good repair. Such maintenance and the keeping of self in a state of good repair obviously require energy and time. While engaged in maintenance or repair, the person is, for that time, unable to play the role. Hence we may expect that persons will, in order to avoid casting doubt on their ability to play a role, deliberately play down or conceal maintenance and repair activity. Speakers know that spontaneity cannot be left to chance but must be prepared for, even rehearsed. Yet, obviously information on the amount of preparation it took to be spontaneous would destroy the audience's belief in the spontaneity. Outer clothes require underclothes, as social life requires an underlife (which is, of course, also social).²⁷

MAINTENANCE OF CONFIDENCE

When identities have been validated and persons poised, interaction may begin. Its continuation, however, requires that a scaffolding

be erected and that attention be given to preventing this scaffolding from collapsing. The scaffold develops as the relationship becomes stabilized. In time persons come to expect that the way they place the other is the way the other announces himself, and that poise will continue to be maintained. Persons now begin to count on these expectations and to have confidence in them. But at any time they may be violated. It was such violations of confidence that made up the greatest single source of embarrassment in our examples. Perhaps this is only an acknowledgment that the parties to every transaction must always maintain themselves *in role* to permit the requisite role-taking, or that identity-switching ought not be accomplished so abruptly that others are left floundering in the encounter as they grope for the new futures that the new identity implies.

This is all the more important in situations where roles are tightly linked together as in situations involving a division of labor. In one instance, a group of social scientists was presenting a progress report of research to a representative of the client subsidizing the research. The principal investigator's presentation was filled out by comments from the other researchers, his professional peers. Negatively critical comments were held to a bare minimum. Suddenly the principal investigator overstepped the bounds. He made a claim that they were well on the road to confirming a hypothesis which, if confirmed, would represent a major contribution. Actually, his colleagues (our informant was one of them) knew that they were very far indeed from confirming the hypothesis. They first sought to catch the leader's eye to look for a hidden message. Receiving none, they lowered their eyes to the table, bit their lips, and fell silent. In the presence of the client's representative, they felt they could not "call" their leader for that would be embarrassing, but they did seek him out immediately afterward for an explanation. The leader agreed that they

²⁷ Consider the fact that the physician often needs time and opportunity to consult medical books and colleagues before he can render an authoritative medical diagnosis. A structural assurance is provided by his having been taught to make diagnoses slowly. Through time thus gained, he takes advantage of informal encounters with colleagues and spare moments between patients when he can consult medical books. A direct revelation of his need for such aids and his rather unsystematic way of getting them would be embarrassing. Yet it is in the patient's best interest that they be kept secret from him, otherwise the patient would be in the position of having to pass judgment on a professional practice when he is, in fact, too involved to render an objective judgment.

were right, but said his claim was politic, that new data might well turn up, and that it was clearly too late to remedy the situation.

Careful examination of this case reveals a more basic reason for the researchers' hesitance to embarrass the leader before the client's representative. If their leader were revealed to be the kind of person who goes beyond the data (or to be a plain liar), serious question could have been raised about the kind of men who willingly work with such a person. Thus they found themselves coerced into unwilling collusion. It was not simply that their jobs depended on continued satisfaction of the client. Rather, they were unwilling to say to themselves and to the client's representative that they were the kind of researchers who would be party to a fraud. To embarrass the leader, then, would have meant embarrassing themselves by casting serious question upon their identities as researchers. Indeed, it was their desire to cling to their identities that led, not long afterward (and after several other similar experiences), to the breakup of the research team.

Just as, in time, an identity may be discredited, so too may poise be upset. Should this occur, each must be able to assume that the other will render assistance if he gets into such control trouble, and each must be secure in the knowledge that the assumption is tenable. Persons will be alert for incipient signs of such trouble—irrelevant attitudes—and attempt to avert the consequences. Goffman has provided many examples in his discussion of dramaturgical loyalty, discipline, and circumspection in the presentation of the self, pointing out protective practices that are employed, such as clearing one's throat before interrupting a conversation, knocking on doors before entering an occupied room, or begging the other's pardon before an intrusion.²⁸

The danger that one's confidence in the

²⁸ Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, pp. 212–33.

other's continued identity or his ability to maintain his poise may be destroyed leads to the generation of a set of *performance norms*. These are social protections against embarrassment.²⁹ If persons adhere to them, the probability of embarrassment is reduced. We discovered two major performance norms.

First, *the standards of role performance almost always allow for flexibility and tolerance*. One is rarely, if ever, totally in role (an exception might be highly ritualized performances, where to acknowledge breaches of expectation is devastatingly embarrassing.³⁰ To illustrate, we expect one another to give attention to what is going on in our transactions, but the attention we anticipate is always *optimal*, never total. To look the other person completely in one's glance and refuse to let go is very embarrassing. A rigid attention is coerced eventuating in a loss of poise. One is rapt in the other's future and deprived of control almost like the hypnotist's subject. Similarly, never to give one's attention to the other is role-incapacitating. If one focuses his gaze not on the other's eyes, but on his forehead, let us say, the encounter is visibly disturbed.³¹ Norms allowing for flexibility and tolerance permit the parties to social transactions ordinarily to assume that they will not be held to rigid standards of conduct and that temporary lapses will be overlooked. The norm is respected by drinking companions who both understand how it is to have had a drop too much and who can also be counted on not to hold another to everything he says, does, or suggests.

²⁹ Implicit in Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1950), p. 308.

³⁰ See the discussion of "role distance" in Erving Goffman, *Encounters* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1961), pp. 105–52.

³¹ Here we are speaking of what Edward T. Hall calls the "gaze line." He points out there are cultural variations in this phenomenon. See his "A System for the Notation of Proxemic Behavior," *American Anthropologist*, LXV (October, 1963), 1012–14.

So, too, colleagues are persons who know enough to embarrass one another but can ordinarily be trusted not to do so. The exclusiveness of colleague groups can be seen, therefore, as a collective defense against embarrassment.

The second performance norm was that of *giving the other fellow the benefit of the doubt*. For the transaction to go on at all, one has at least to give the other fellow a *chance* to play the role he seeks to play. Clearly, if everyone went around watching for chances to embarrass others, so many would be incapacitated for role performance that society would collapse. Such considerate behavior is probably characteristic of all human society, because of the dependence of social relations on role performance. A part of socialization, therefore, must deal with the prevention of embarrassment by the teaching of tact. People must learn not only not to embarrass others, but to ignore the lapses that can be embarrassing whenever they occur. In addition, people must learn to *cope* with embarrassment. Consequently, embarrassment will occasionally be deliberately perpetrated to ready people for role incapacitation when it occurs.

DELIBERATE EMBARRASSMENT

Although we have emphasized up to this point instances of embarrassment which arise from wholly unexpected acts and revelations, the unexpected is often deliberately perpetrated. Examples are practical jokes, teasing, initiation into secret societies, puncturing false fronts, and public degradation. Since embarrassment appears to represent social damage that is not at all easily repaired, we might well ask why the condition may be deliberately established. The embarrassed person stands exposed as incapable of continued role performance—a person who cannot be depended upon. In his presence, all must pause and review their assessments and expectations. Whatever they decide, the transaction is halted, and those dependent upon it are deprived of the realization

of the futures that they have entrusted to others.

Embarrassments, therefore, always have careers. One person embarrasses others whose hurried attempts to salvage the situation merely call further attention to the embarrassment. A point may be reached where no repair is possible—the embarrassed person breaks into tears, flees, or, in the classic case, commits suicide—not to save face, but because face has been destroyed beyond repair.³² Other terminations are possible, as we have shown. The embarrassing situation may be transformed by humor—laughed off—to define it as unserious and to invite others to symbolize their solidarity with the embarrassed person by joining in the laughter.³³ Blame may be diverted away from the transaction and placed on others on the outside. The embarrassed one may fall sick. There are numerous outcomes, and, while some are less drastic than others, none is completely devoid of risk. Why is it, then, that embarrassment may be deliberately perpetrated? There are at least three reasons or social functions that may be attributed to deliberate embarrassment.

First, since embarrassing situations are inevitable in social life, persons must be schooled to maintain poise when poise is threatened, to maintain the identities they have established in social situations in the face of discreditation, and to sustain the confidence others have built up about matters. Deliberate embarrassment acts to socialize young people with these skills. Consequently, all young children trip one another, push, disarrange one another's clothing and other items of personal appearance. Besides being fun, such play³⁴

³² Goffman, "On Face-Work," *Psychiatry*, XVIII (August, 1955), 213–31.

³³ See Ruth Laub Coser, "Some Social Functions of Laughter: A Study of Humor in a Hospital Setting," *Human Relations*, XII (May, 1959), 171–82.

³⁴ Careful attention must be given to all phases of children's play, which includes very much more than the anticipatory and fantastic dramas emphasized by George H. Mead.

socializes the child in the maintenance of poise despite direct physical attacks on his "balance." Indeed, young children will spin about, inducing dizziness as they unknowingly test their ability to handle the imbalance in the play that Roger Caillois speaks of as *ilinx* or vertigo.³⁵ But socialization continues throughout life, and adult men, for example, test who can maintain poise in the face of the other's loss by playing at "drinking the other under the table." The roller coaster and tilt-a-whirl, and less upsetting machines like the merry-go-round and ferris wheel can be interpreted as a technology available to test poise.³⁶ Almost by definition, every game is a test of poise, but some sports place particular emphasis upon such tests—ski-jumping and gymnastics.³⁷ Announced identities are also challenged and impugned in play, as in "name-calling," and such teasing often reaches out to call into question everything one seeks to establish about himself in social encounters:

Shame! Shame! Double shame!
Everybody knows your name!

The child, of course, learns the institutionalized replies to such tests of identity and self-confidence which throw the challenge back:

My name, my name is Puddin' Tame.
Ask me again and I'll tell you the same!

As others have noted, the challenges and responses inherent in such tests of poise, identity, and self-confidence often assume

³⁵ The Structure and Classification of Games," *Diogenes*, No. 12 (Winter, 1955), pp. 62–75.

³⁶ A definite age-grading of the technology may be noticed in our society. The mildest test of poise is provided for the very young—the merry-go-round—and the devilish devices seem to be reserved for the middle and late teen-agers.

³⁷ Poise is an essential part of the commercialized tumbling exhibitions we call wrestling. Interviews with professional wrestlers by one of the writers establish that the most feared "opponent" is not at all the most fierce, but the neophyte, upon whose poise the established professional cannot rely.

a pattern of interactive insult. The classic case is "playing the dozens."³⁸

If one function of deliberate embarrassment is socialization, we would guess that such tests would be concentrated in the formative years and in other periods of major status passage. Our survey of adults in the evening extension class showed this to be true. When we asked them to recall the time of their lives when they were frequently embarrassed, the adolescent years were most commonly mentioned. Instances of deliberate embarrassment also included hazings and the humiliation which accompanied socialization into the armed forces. It may well be that every move into an established social world—every major *rite de passage*—is facilitated by the deliberate perpetration of embarrassing tests of poise, identity, and self-knowledge.³⁹

Second, embarrassment is deliberately perpetrated as a negative sanction as in "calling" the one who is giving an undesirable performance. Since embarrassment does incapacitate the person from

³⁸ This game, found most commonly among American Negroes, is never carried on between two isolated antagonists, but requires the physical presence of peers who evaluate each insult and goad the players to heightened performances. The antagonists and their peers are usually members of the same in-group, again emphasizing the socializing function of the play. As the insults become more and more acrid, one antagonistic may "break down" (lose poise) and suggest fighting. That person is perceived as having failed the test, and the group then moves to prevent a fight from actually occurring. For Negroes, the ability to take insults without breaking down is clearly functional for survival in Negro-white interaction (see John Dollard, "The Dozens: Dialectic of Insult," *The American Imago*, I [November, 1939], 3–25; Ralph E. Berdie, "Playing the Dozens," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XLII [January, 1947], 120–21; and Cornelius L. Golightly and Israel Scheffler, "Playing the Dozens: A Research Note," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, XLIII [January, 1948], 104–5).

³⁹ An interesting comment on this point was made by Erving Goffman in a personal communication: "Since the theater is the place for the issue of poise, could our extensive high-school theatrical movement then be part of the socialization you speak of?"

performing his role, it can clearly be used to stop someone from playing a role that might discredit a collectivity. Empirical categories include public reprimands, exposure of false fronts, open gossip and cattiness, or embarrassment perpetrated as a retaliation for an earlier embarrassment. In some of these cases, a person is exposed as having no right to play the role he has laid claim to, because the identity in which his role is anchored is invalid. In others, the person is punished by terminating his role performance so that he can no longer enjoy its perquisites.

A third function of deliberate embarrassment is the establishment and maintenance of power. The technique here is rather more subtle than those we have discussed. Specifically, the scene may be laid for embarrassment so that only by following the line established by the one who sets the scene may embarrassment be avoided. In this case, one assures himself that his decision will carry the day by guaranteeing that any alternative will result in irreparable damage to the whole collectivity. Organizational policy changes, for example, may be accomplished by cloaking them in a cover story impregnated with the organizational ideology. To resist the proposed changes, consequently, risks the discreditation of the entire organization. Another example is to be found in "kicking an official upstairs." The decision will be reached in a policy-making discussion where the official in question may be present. In the discussion, emphasis will be given to the official's qualifications for the new post so that the "stage manager" leads a new self forward to replace the old self of the official in

question. Discreditation of the new self, particularly in the official's presence, would wreak such damage on the transaction that it must be foregone and the "manager's" decision conceded.⁴⁰

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have inquired into the conditions necessary for role performance. Embarrassment has been employed as a sensitive indicator of those conditions, for that which embarrasses incapacitates role performance. Our data have led us to describe the conditions for role performance in terms of identity, poise, and sustained confidence in one another. When these become disturbed and discredited, role performance cannot continue. Consequently, provisions for the avoidance or prevention of embarrassment, or quick recovery from embarrassment when it does occur are of key importance to any society or social transaction, and devices to insure the avoidance and minimization of embarrassment will be part of every persisting social relationship. Specifically, tests of identity, poise, and self-knowledge will be institutionalized in every society. Such devices, like all mechanisms of social control, are capable of manipulation and may well be exploited to establish and maintain power in social transactions. Yet, deliberate or not, embarrassment is as general a sociological concept as is role.

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⁴⁰ Erving Goffman describes a similar process by which persons are channeled through a "betrayal funnel" into a mental hospital (see "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient," *Psychiatry*, XXII [May, 1959], 123-42).