

1953

Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman

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IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

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mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

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COVER DESIGN: Mark McGillivray | Copy-editing & proofing: Emily Alexander

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, 2015 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

ISBN 978-1-951399-09-2 (print) | ISBN 978-1-951399-10-8 (pdf)

ISBN 978-1-951399-08-5 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-951399-07-8 (pdf)

DOI 10.32376/3f8575cb.baaa5oaf

Edition 1 published in December 2022

The University of Chicago

COMMUNICATION CONDUCT
IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

*A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Division of
the Social Sciences in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor
of Philosophy*

Department of Sociology

By

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Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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Chapter XV: Safe Supplies

WHEN AN INDIVIDUAL ENTERS the perceptual range of others, a kind of responsibility is placed upon him. Normally he must assume that his behavior will be observed and that it will be interpreted as an expression of the attitude he has toward those who observe him. In the realm of undirected communication, this implies that he will be expected to behave in a decorous manner, giving appropriate consideration to the presence of others. The requirements of decorous behavior, in our society and in others, will not be considered here. In the realm of directed communication—for example, conversation—the individual must assume that both his messages and his behavior as a recipient will be expected to contribute to the maintenance of the working acceptance.

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Once individuals have extended accredited participant status to one another and have plunged into conversation, then it is necessary to sustain a continuous flow of messages until an inoffensive occasion presents itself for terminating the interplay. It appears that some persons can be so distantly related to one another that very little pretext may be needed to break off conversation and relapse into silence, and that some persons can be so intimately related to one another that on many occasions they can assume that no offense will be given when conversation lapses. It also seems that a wide range of social distance and of situations exists between these two extremes where a fairly good excuse is needed before conversation can safely lapse.

In those situations where lapse of communication is of itself inappropriate communication, participants must make sure that someone among them is conveying a message and that it is an acceptable or appropriate message. Since the stream of messages must be constantly fed, participants sometimes tend to use up all the appropriate messages that are available to them. The problem then arises: what can be used as a safe supply, that is, what can be used as a reliable source of acceptable messages? At certain times, especially during lengthy informal interplay, this problem introduces a need for a high order of ritual management.

1. A famous kind of safe supply is found in what is often called "small talk," that is, issues that can appropriately be raised between persons of widely different status without this fact prejudicing the social distance between them, and to which almost everyone can be expected to have the same attitude.¹ In our society, animals, children,² accidents, and the weather usually form the object of small talk. In Dixon, the catch—or lack thereof—which the two local fishing boats made that day was frequently a subject for comment. During the spring, lambs and foals were also safe topics, since it was assumed that no one could be oblivious to their charm. If anyone on the island had had an accident, or taken sick, or died, or gotten married, these facts were constantly employed by others in small talk. A sickness lasting a few weeks was especially useful, for persons could ask one another several times a day how the unfortunate one was progressing and comment sympathetically. The weather was very frequently mentioned in Dixon and among those actually engaged in crofting was often mentioned in relation to its effects upon the crops.³ Comments about the weather are often thought to be rather empty things. On the island this seemed not to be the case. To farmers, of course, weather is an important contingency, but more than this seemed to be involved. If the weather was bad, as it usually was, comments always played this down and conveyed the fact that the individual was not being beaten by it. The worst days would call forth such comments as:

"No such a good day." "Aye, it's terrible weather." "No very good for the taties." "No, it's not that."

Every time interchanges occurred, the participants seemed to reaffirm their loyalty to conditions on the island and to the persons who were staying on it.

Another widely employed source of small talk in Dixon was provided by recent purchases of material artifacts. Everyone on the island, whether gentry or crofter, was obliged to face many of the same conditions of domestic discomfort and to attempt to meet them by means of the objects available at the local shops or by mail-order. Both men and women took an interest in these matters, and if conversation lagged, participants could always fall back on a discussion of the merits of the latest household tool, or gadget, or comfort that had been purchased.

Two facts of interest may be cited concerning small talk. First, some groups seem to place special attention on skills regarding small talk and to feel that an important symbol of membership is the capacity to sustain a conversation of small talk whenever necessary. Members of such groups may even undergo conscious training in this

¹ Malinowski uses the phrase "phatic communion" to refer to the exchange of gossip and small talk; see Supplement One to Ogden and Richards, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 314–315. Strangers who are close to each other physically but not engaged in communication may often fall automatically into momentary accredited interaction if an unexpected event occurs that both patently observe and that provide momentary guarantee that their attitudes to the event will be similar, while at the same time providing some grounds for feeling that the basis of communication will not lead to further entangling involvements but will be easily terminated.

² Animals and children that can be gotten to behave for a moment in a human-like fashion are especially useful as a safe supply.

³ This corresponds to what is sometimes called "shop talk."

kind of behavior. Secondly, it seems to be in the character of small talk that it is quickly exhausted; small talk allows for comments, not discussions. Hence when persons are to be engaged in conversation for a considerable length of time, other safe supplies must be employed.

2. During informal interplay, participants frequently resort to a topic of conversation that is sometimes called *gossip*. This involves reference to persons who are not present (and, sometimes, to temporarily inactive aspects of present persons) and to past conduct on their part which can be taken as illustrative of approved or disapproved attributes.⁴ The conduct gossiped about must be sufficiently clearcut and spectacular to ensure that all listeners will place the same interpretation on it. In order to maintain a working acceptance, topics upon which persons may place opposing values must be avoided.

On the island two forms of gossip seemed popular. In one case, a speaker aired his feelings, which had been hurt or injured by what he considered to have been an improper action on the part of the absent person who was the object of the gossip. Recipients were asked in this way to confirm for the speaker the fact that he had been unjustly injured and, perhaps, to thereby confirm the principles of justice that the injury had put into question. In the other case, the gossipier did not refer to acts which had offended him in particular but to conduct on the part of the object of gossip which the speaker approved or disapproved even though he had not directly gained or suffered by it. In these cases, the speaker took a kind of editorial attitude—the community's point of view—toward the conduct about which he was gossiping. It is interesting to note that the islanders had a high awareness of community standards and so, in commenting upon a noteworthy action of an absent person, a speaker could merely provide a flat objective statement of the act, with a marked lack of emphasis either linguistically or expressively, and be correct in his assumption that this would be enough to call forth from his recipients the expected response. The most extreme infractions of the community's standards, as, for instance, when an open fight occurred at a community social, would be gossiped about in a stilled atmosphere, the speaker providing only a toneless, brief statement of the occurrence. Outsiders, of course, would misread these conversations, feeling that an act of no importance was being considered or that the islanders were extraordinarily fair in their references to social delicts.

As a safe supply, gossip is limited by the fact that the self accorded to each participant is usually defined partly in terms of minimal loyalties to particular persons not present. Breach of these loyalties by gossip conveyed or tolerated may disrupt the tenor of the interaction.

⁴ Gossip is usually analyzed as an informal means of social control exerted by the sanction of adverse or favorable public opinion. This gives to gossip a social function with respect to community standards. This wider function of gossip is irrelevant here. We are concerned with gossip's social function in terms of maintenance of interplay.

An islander who is married engages in very little serious gossip about his spouse, nor do children of whatever age gossip about their parents. Such acts of disloyalty would be a source of embarrassment to those who observed them. Similarly, a commoner exerts certain controls on the amount of gossip he will indulge in about absent commoners in conversation with the gentry and outsiders. On the whole, only commoners who are generally disrespected and regarded as more or less beyond the pale are gossiped about in such a context.

On the island, a very happy supply of gossip is found in what are sometimes called "post mortems." After a social, members of a household would discuss over breakfast and lunch the previous evening's events, assured that all participants in the conversation had had the same experience and would be able to participate actively. Reference would be made to what persons wore, to how they behaved, to the fact that the local baritone could sing better but was trying out a new song, to the fact that the boys from Northend didn't know all the words to the song they had sung, to the fact that a local woman had gray hair showing at the roots and that if you were going to use dye you should look after it well, etc.

3. Another safe supply employed on the island consisted of statements made by the speaker concerning the state of his health. This was especially employed by older people and by women. There was an understanding that self-references of this kind did not constitute bragging or a request for too much attention. Recipients could be expected to be ready with an indulgent reply. It seemed that the more "serous" the disability suffered by a person, the wider the range of persons with whom he could employ his disability as a safe topic of conversation.

4. An important variety of safe supply relies on the use of an un-serious definition of the situation. An inoffensive choice of message during interplay may have to fulfill so many requirements that it may be advisable for the sender to abstain from serious communication and instead convey a message in an obvious spirit of levity. Messages conveyed in an unserious tone may be inoffensive and yet contain statements that would ordinarily be offensive.⁵ The point here is that there are many occasions when it is easier to find a message that would be offensive if conveyed seriously than it is to find a message that is inoffensive when conveyed seriously.⁶ Levity is useful, furthermore, because it permits and even enjoins the use of unlimited exaggeration. This kind of clarification increases the likelihood that persons of widely different statuses will be sensitive to the message and take the same attitude (although in jest) to it.

Levity, as a safe supply, usually entails a kind of unserious ritual profanation of the sender or of the persons to whom he addresses

⁵ A message conveyed in an unserious manner cannot be taken directly as a reflection of the valuations of the sender. Indirect judgments must be made on the basis of an understanding as to the kinds of persons who would make a point about making a joke about a particular given matter.

⁶ Unserious messages may themselves be offensive if they refer to matters too sacred to joke about or to matters which ought to have been considered acceptable enough for ordinary, serious communication.

his message. It is sometimes referred to as kidding, razzing, raillery, joking, banter, joshing, or leg-pulling. It seems to be especially important where persons who have always been in one specific relationship to each other find themselves in an interplay in which another kind of relationship prevails.⁷

On the island, joking as a safe supply was especially employed between crofters and non-crofters. Thus the doctor would complain that everyone insisted upon joking with him when he attended socials and that no other kind of behavior on his part seemed wanted by others. Joking seemed to be especially prevalent and especially easy between older women of the commoner class and young males of some outside status, possibly because a member of one of those groups was in very little competition with a member of the other group, and they could hence afford to be on sufficiently easy terms with one another to allow for joking.⁸

5. A safe supply is found in courtesies, especially those involving small offerings and assistances. Thus, whenever it is possible for one person to be defined as host or hostess, it is possible for that person to devote many messages to solicitous enquires [*sic*] after the comfort of the guests and to offerings of food and the like. As has been suggested, codified manners provide an island of safety to swim to when in doubt or when you want to retreat.

* * * * *

Safe supplies have been defined as stores of messages that persons can fall back upon when they are in a position of having to maintain interplay and yet not having anything to say. It is worth noting briefly that islanders employ two social strategies that are akin to the use of safe supplies, being, perhaps, functional alternatives for safe supplies, and yet somewhat different from them.

First, there were certain acts of a task-oriented kind, such as eating, smoking, or knitting, which islanders, under certain circumstances, allowed to be interspersed between messages, so that the same number of messages could be stretched out over a longer period of time without arousing a feeling that unwanted silences occurred. The womenfolk especially employed this technique in the case of knitting, and three or four women knitting together could by that means maintain themselves in a kind of slowed or dormant interplay, where it was understood that those present were accredited participants but where spates of knitting and silence were permissible between messages. It was considered improper for men to knit (although in some cases this would have provided them with a better income than they could earn on the croft), and they often employed

⁷ In social anthropological literature, the term "joking relationship" has come to signify a special privilege of familiarity and disrespect between two persons. The relationship serves to prevent the expression of hostility, even though important grounds for hostility exist. Harmony must be maintained because the persons are not in a position to express their feelings by means of conflict or avoidance. They are not in a position to do so because each is intimately and dependently related to the same third person, or to third persons who are themselves intimately related to one another. (For a statement and bibliography see A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, "A Further Note on Joking Relationships," *Africa*, XIX, 133-140.) The analysis of joking employed in this study follows the social anthropological one but with a shift in emphasis from the need to maintain a relationship to the need to maintain working acceptance during interplay. The position is taken here that the familiarity and disrespect found in joking relationships so obviously do not apply to the actors that these forms of treatment can be used as a signal for proclaiming a state of unseriousness. Serious communication would eventually lead to open hostility, and so joking is seriously necessary in order to keep peace.

⁸ For a study of the role of non-competition in the formation of convivial interplay, see Edward Gross, "Informal Relations and the Social Organization of Work in an Industrial Office," (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1949).

pike-smoking as a substitute. The length of time taken to cut tobacco, fill, light, and relight a pipe, and the length of time taken on each draw provided welcome pauses between messages. Both sexes often used the fire in open fireplaces as a resting device. The constantly changing shape of the flame apparently expertises a kind of sought-after hypnotism, allowing a person to pause after receiving a message and stare into the fire before answering.

Secondly, a kind of interplay can be maintained by means of organized recreation or games. In general, these systems of interaction allow for the maintenance of accredited participation and a single focus of attention, although the messages involved may not be of the linguistic kind. In the case of games such as whist or billiards, rotation of role of sender, length of messages, number of messages per participant and per interplay, and the general character of messages are all determined and accepted beforehand in terms of the general rules of the game. Each shot or play, within the limited language and logic of the game, is a kind of statement that must be attended to and answered in some way by the other players. On the island, the playing of organized games was extremely common and was to be expected whenever more than eight or nine persons gathered together for convivial interaction. Without rather mechanical means of this kind to organize messages, large parties, or parties with islanders and non-islanders, could be expected to flag and grind to an uneasy halt. Games as a source of messages is a source that never gives out.⁹

⁹ Group singing and cooperative participation in work tasks were also widely used as a means of assuring proper ritual relations between those present to each other in a given place. However, these processes do not typically have a distinctive *interactional* statement-and-reply character and have not been considered in this report.