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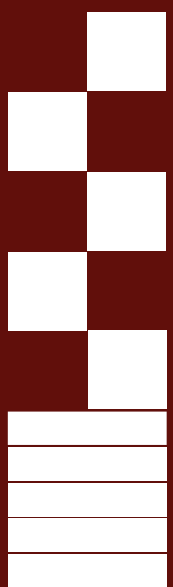
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman



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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

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Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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In the previous chapter, consideration was given to the ways in which persons may be excluded from an interplay. We now consider ways in which persons who are accredited participants may withdraw from an interplay.

During an interplay it is not uncommon for a participant to move away from the spatial region enclosed by his co-participants and leave the interplay, temporarily or permanently. This kind of departure is a well-designed sign vehicle for conveying a negative valuation of the participants who remain in the interplay. Departure may thus create a sign situation. A participant who wants to leave an interplay therefore tends to wait for a moment that is opportune—a natural break, as it were—so that the expressive implications of his departure will be minimized. He also tends to offer excuses to the remaining participants, so that a natural interpretation can be placed upon his departure. If he leaves momentarily to fix the lights, close the door, or do any or the other minor acts which help to maintain the region in order, he usually shows by his proximity to the disturbance or by his official role (e.g., as host) in these matters, that his momentary departure is not a personal reflection upon the interplay.

Whether a participant departs courteously or openly and flagrantly stalks out of the interplay, the remaining participants are aware of the departure and can openly modify their communication in accordance with this fact. They may, for example, compensate for the offense caused by the departure by making suitably abusive comments about the person who has departed. We may therefore think of departure—whether executed tactfully or not—as conforming to the feed-back model of communication.

There are, however, ways in which a participant can leave an interplay so that the remaining participants may neither recognize this fact openly nor compensate for it effectively. Here we have the case where a participant leaves the interplay but not his ecological position in it. It is a case of withdrawal, not departure.[1] The disaffected participant acts as if he were attending to the accredited messages,

[1] Withdrawal is, in a sense, a form of insufficient involvement, but it is not treated here from that point of view. The question of proper degree of involvement, a crucial problem in its own right, will be considered later.

while at the same time his actual thoughts and attention are elsewhere.

An illustration of how a participant may remain in his ecological position and retain his status as an accredited recipient in an interplay while at the same time withdrawing into imaginary places and imaginary interplays is found in what Bateson and Mead call "away."[2] The participant keeps his face more or less in a position to convey attention signs to the speaker, but his thoughts and eyes turn inward or come to focus on some object in the room. Persons who behave in this way are sometimes said to be day-dreaming, wool-gathering, or to have gone into a brown study. This kind of withdrawal may be rather apparent to the remaining participants, but the obviousness of the withdrawal is apparently compensated for by the fact that no other participant need join the offender in his disaffection.

In Dixon, the practice of going "away" seemed common and was now and then a threat to informal social life. During meal-time conversation, it would be common for someone to withdraw from the interplay and start playing with the cat in an abstracted way, or roll crumbs of bread on the table in a fugue-like manner, or become lost in the latest picture magazine. Almost always these acts of withdrawal seemed to be resented a little by the remaining participants, but, as was typical with communication offenses in Dixon, only young persons were sanctioned in an explicit way for this misbehavior.

A participant may retain his status as an accredited participant and yet at the same time engage in another, typically less inclusive, interplay. This less inclusive interplay he typically carries on by means of signs such as facial gestures and eye-to-eye signals, which can only be received from within a narrow zone, and by means of a lowered voice, which has a short range. By relying on vehicles of this kind, care is taken to offer minimal jamming and disruption of the message that is accredited at the time by the more inclusive interplay. By modulation downward of sign impulses, lip service is given to the inclusive accredited interplay, allowing everyone to maintain the fiction that the privilege of participation has not been treated lightly. Prior and official right is thus given to the inclusive interplay to dominate the situation, as it were. In other words, we may have an accredited or dominant interplay and a subordinate interplay occurring within it. Typically, a subordinate interplay is initiated after the dominant one has begun, and typically the subordinate interplay is terminated before the dominant one has ended.

The formation of a subordinate interplay is commonly a source of tension, perhaps because partial withdrawal of this kind provides

[2] See Bateson and Mead, *op cit.*, pp. 68–69. It is to be noted that while persons can be away with respect to a conversational interplay, they can also be away with respect to more loosely defined interaction systems, such as social occasions. During the community dances, for example , most couples, when they talked at all, allowed their talk to be structured by the ethos of the occasion, using a set pattern of high-spirited small talk concerning the evening. Often, however, a couple could be seen who were going through the motions of the dance but were engaged in talk of a serious kind that removed them, psychologically, from the rest or the dancers. So, too, the musicians, whose contribution set the tone for the moment, would often withdraw into a distant reverie all of their own. Similarly, a person washing dishes as her part of a cooperative work venture would sometimes start to hum in a very quiet way and soon become oblivious to all around her. Pupils in the primary grades seemed especially prone to leave the classroom in this fashion and suddenly begin to leaf through a reader or twist and untwist the strap of a schoolbag in an abstracted manner.

such a ready way of expressing some kind of disrespect for the dominant interplay or for the person who is at the time the accredited sender in the dominant interplay. Subordinate interplays vary, it seems, in an important way according to the degree to which excluded participants of the dominant interplay resent or accept the smaller interplay from which they are excluded.

There are many kinds of subordinate interplay that cause little or no offense to excluded persons who are accredited participants of the dominant interplay. Frequently factors in the situation will make it obvious that the partial withdrawal of those in the subordinate interplay is clearly not an expression of disregard for the dominant interplay. For example, during a formally organized social occasion, it is sometimes necessary for the chairman or other officials to enter briefly into a huddle with one or two other persons in order to straighten out administrative details that may have become tangled. In such cases no attempt needs to be made to conceal the fact that a subordinate interplay is in progress; respect is shown to the dominant interplay by making the subordinate one as brief, as quiet, and as affectless as possible. Similarly, during such occasions as committee meetings, it is not uncommon for adjacent participants who are somewhat removed from the speaker to lean over towards each other and carry on a brief muted conversation; this sort of withdrawal causes little offense, especially if it can be felt by others that the messages conveyed in the subordinate interplay involve a "take" to the dominant message, and a take that could be given an official hearing without thereby disrupting the working acceptance.

Those who maintain an inoffensive subordinate interplay must attempt to minimize the interference which they cause, but they need not attempt to conceal the fact that they are engaged in a subordinate interplay. There are many cases, however, where toleration of subordinate interplays is not very high. The situation may, for instance, offer no happy pretext which excluded participants can employ as evidence of the fact that no disrespect is being shown. The rule that attention must be paid to the accredited sender may be strictly drawn. The content of the subordinate interplay may appear to be—were it suddenly given an official hearing—quite inconsistent with the maintenance of a working acceptance. In these and other circumstances, subordinate interplays may be declared illegal, as it were, and have to go underground. Thus, just as subordinate interplays vary in the degree to which they are inoffensive, they also vary in the degree to which those who maintain them attempt to conceal that this is the case and attempt to communicate with one another in a surreptitious, furtive, and underhanded way.[3]

Subordinate interplays that are carried out in a quite furtive way provide an interesting subject matter for study. Sometimes it is possible for a small number of persons to carry on this kind of conduct because they happen to be outside the visual line of the speaker or of those who are more or less responsible for seeing that order is maintained.[4] Sometimes participants of subordinate interplays can feign the sort of expression they would have if they were indulging in an inoffensive subordinate interplay and at the same time convey surreptitious messages which are quite inconsistent with the working acceptance of the dominant interplay. Sometimes this improper communication behavior is carried on by means of "cant," a system of signals which mean one thing to the initiate and another to outsiders.[5] Usually, however, the offenders mange to conceal their offensive behavior by reducing the whole subordinate interplay to a quick glance or a "significant" expression of the eyes. A wink is perhaps the standard gesture for stabilizing this relationship. In any case, those who participate in the furtive interchange enter into collusion with each other and express a common, and usually negative, attitude toward the dominant interplay or toward certain participants in it.[6]

An illustration of how subtle the cues which establish a furtive interplay can be may be found in the auctions in Dixon:

> Household furnishings have a relatively high second-hand value in Dixon because the freight charges from Britain to the island are very high. The auction sales that are held about once every two months are therefore important occasions. A person who bids at these auctions runs the risk of showing his neighbors how much money he has. A bidder also runs the risk of openly competing with someone who is a relative, neighbor, or friend. There is a tendency (which may be found in auctions anywhere) for the bidder to signal to the auctioneer by means of unobtrusive signs, so that in many cases it is impossible for anyone but the auctioneer to tell who has raised the bid. Even the auctioneer frequently makes mistakes, and persons are sold things that they did not think they had placed a bid upon. Signals such as taking one's left hand halfway out of one's pocket are used to convey bids. In general, however, the bidder relies upon catching the eye of the auctioneer and giving him an extremely noncommittal look. It is understandable that there are widely current jokes in Dixon concerning the danger of so much as looking in the direction of the auctioneer during an auction.

In Dixon, during informal conversation, it was very common tor a furtive interplay to occur as a means by which two or more persons could express an impermissible attitude toward another person who was present.[7] Sometimes the collusive evaluation was a positive or favorable one. Thus, when children between the ages of six and about twelve were drawn into adult conversation and behaved in

[3] For completeness, a minor communication arrangement must be mentioned. Sometimes a recipient will convey a furtive statement and make a careful attempt to ensure that many of those present will overhear what he has said and that he has said it furtively. The obligation of the accredited sender to overlook all subordinate interplay is thus more or less consciously exploited and played with. We sometimes employ the term "stage whisper" to refer to this communication aggression. Of course, the accredited speaker can turn the tables and force the person who is playing at whispering to send his message in an official way.

[4] A crude example of this is to be found in the primary schoolrooms in Dixon, where pupils will hold a book up between their faces and the teacher in an attempt to conceal from the teacher the fact that "talking" is going on. Sometimes a pupil will grimace at his teacher, when he cannot be seen by the teacher, apparently content with establishing a collusive relationship with himself. Adults in Dixon seemed to have learned that collusion should occur with someone, not merely with oneself.

[5] The "shill" or confederate operates in this way. Collusion during divorce trials, where the plaintiff and defendant convey a permissible discord to the judge in order to settle an impermissible one is another case in point.

[6] An interesting limiting case is found in what might be called "double-talk." By means of this communication arrangement, persons engage an innocuous conversation but phrase their messages in such a way as to convey information about topics which they have no right to discuss together. Double-talk typically occurs in communication between a superordinate and a subordinate upon matters which are officially outside of the competence or jurisdiction of the subordinate but which are actually dependent upon him. It is a device by which the subordinate can lead the superordinate without putting into jeopardy the status difference between them. Armies and jails apparently abound in double-talk. It is also found in communications pertaining to questions of law. Double-talk permits two persons to make an illicit agreement with each other without putting one participant in the vulnerable position of admitting this fact to the other. Police

a charming way, the adults would frequently convey to each other a very warm approval of the young performer. Usually, however, collusive interplays directed against a person present seemed to be a way of punishing the person for having behaved in a foolish manner or a way of correcting for the injury he had done to the sentiments possessed by the other participants concerning how they ought to be treated or how a person ought to behave. Thus, when the hotel managers were more strict than the help thought was warranted, the help used sometimes to stick their tongues out at their employers so that all but the target of the aggression could see.[8] Similarly, in the kitchen, when someone got too excited, or too greedy, or too vain, the others present would glance at each other with just a faint amount of derision sparking in their eyes. So also, during billiards, if one player got too much caught up in the game, either taking too much pleasure in a good shot or showing too much anger at missing a shot, the others present would often enter into a collusive relationship against him.

On the island, the presence of a member of the gentry was always an opportunity for islanders to enter into collusive communication. Thus, when Mr. Allen would come to the pier to check up on the rate of work and to talk to the foreman, a worker located behind Mr. Allen's back would sometimes make profanizing gestures. On one occasion, a worker took up an empty bag of lime and whirled it about his head, testing the limits to which derogatory action could be carried on behind the back of the boss without the boss seeing it. Interestingly enough, when one person made an effort to tease a second person by making claims that were literally false, the teaser would sometimes enter into collusion with the remaining persons, in part, apparently, as a means of guaranteeing that at least someone would know that it was a joke all along. Here the teaser seemed to employ furtive interplay as a safety measure, to ensure that later he could establish that he was joking, not lying. This kind of collusion was frequently established by making an exaggerated mouth gesture from a position in the room where all but the person teased could observe it. This of course also guaranteed that no one would give the joke away.

Some further illustrations follow.

> The hotel managers, the Tates, and a few guests are standing in the hall leading to the scullery. The cook faces them and participates eagerly and politely in their conversation. The scullery boy, who is behind the cook and concealed from the others, gooses the cook, who must keep a straight face.

> Mr. Tate is feeding the cat while he and the others in the kitchen are eating dinner. Mrs. Tate watches him and expresses a clear look of

bribery, for example, is usually regulated through an etiquette which allows each person to act as if no bribe had been made or none had been uttered. The point of interest here is that all the persons in the dominant interplay are also in the furtive one. In double-talk there is no third person. The roles taken by persons in the furtive interplay are a slight upon the roles taken by the *same* persons in the dominant interplay.

[7] In mediated communication arrangements, the temptation to enter into collusive interplays is great, partly because it can be so easily managed. When person A is in the presence of person B and interrupts their interplay to talk over the telephone to person C, or to read a letter from person C, then some collusive action of A and B against C almost invariably occurs. Thus, when the maid answered the hotel telephone and told the person calling that Mrs. Tate was a distance away and could not conveniently come to the phone, there would be a collusive smile between the maid and the hotel guests sitting near the phone.

[8] Children in the Dixon schools employed the same device against their teachers when the teacher's back was turned, but in some of these cases it appeared as if the pupil was mainly concerned with expressing to himself a spirit of defiance. Here again, collusion seemed to be with oneself.

affection which she seems to have been practicing up. One of the maids, who thinks it is improper for a cat to be fed at the table and for Mrs. Tate to show affected affection, openly grimaces at both of them, knowing that for a moment they will not be able to see her but that the others at the table will.

Mrs., Tate is talking to a friend about the possibility of buying his cottage. A maid comes in whose boy friend is also interested in buying it. Mrs. Tate conveys by her eyes that the person is supposed to act as if something else had been under discussion. He does.

A customer in Allen's shop asks the clerk for a three volt flashlight bulb. The clerk says that they only have 2.3 but suggests it be tried. It immediately burns out. Customer then asks manager for a three volt bulb. The manager says they only have 2.3, and it wouldn't do to try it. The clerk casts the customer a knowing smile. Customer and clerk say nothing.

At a crofter's house party a visiting piano tuner from Capital City tries to monopolize the evening and suggests that there should be a round of story telling with each person telling one. Two guests shoot each other a collusive, "Holy Christ!" look.

A player at billiards makes a bad shot and gets over-involved; he swears. Others present cast each other snickering looks.

At progressive whist, a new player mistakenly shuffles cards at the end of a hand. Two of the remaining three players cast him a friendly smile, suggesting that a trick has been played on the game but that they will neither tell nor take it seriously.

A quarry team of seven is building a garage; four of them are digging the pit. The job of one is to scoop out water. Instead of getting into the pit he leans over slowly and tries to lift the water out. The man in the pit looks at another outside the pit as if to say, "Do you see what this fellow asks to be done for him?"