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Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman

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IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

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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

By

Erving Goffman

Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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Chapter II: Social Order and Social Interaction

IN THE STUDY OF social life, it is common to take as a basic model the concept of social order and to analyze concrete behavior by focusing on the ways in which it conforms to and deviates from this model. In the present study, I assume that conversational interactions between concrete persons who are in each other's immediate presence is a species of social order and can be studied by applying the model of social order to it.¹ The applicability of this model to conversational interaction is suggested below. In this and in other chapters dealing with the conceptual framework, conversation in Western society is assumed as the data for which the framework is to be relevant.

doi

¹ The classification of social interaction as a species of social organization or social order derives from Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1951). My view of the criteria for social order derives mainly from Chester I. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

THE MODEL

1. Social order is found where the differentiated activity of different actors is integrated into a single whole, allowing thereby for the conscious or unconscious realization of certain overall ends or functions.

In the case of conversational interaction, the acts that are integrated together are acts of communication, or messages. The flow of messages during a conversation is continuous and is uninterrupted by competing messages, and any one message from a participant is sufficiently meaningful and acceptable to the other participants to constitute a starting point for the next message. Continuous and uninterrupted interchange of message is the work flow of conversational interaction.

2. The contribution of an actor is a legitimate expectation for other actors; they are able to know beforehand within what limits the actor is likely to behave, and they have a moral right to expect him to behave within these limits. Correspondingly, he ought to behave in the way that is expected of him because he feels that this is a morally desirable way of behaving and not merely an expeditious way of behaving.

This criterion of social order can be applied without modification or elaboration to the case of conversational interaction.

3. Proper contribution from participants is assured or "motivated" by means of a set of positive sanctions or rewards and negative sanctions or punishments. These sanctions grant or withdraw immediately expressed social approval and goods of a more instrumental kind. These sanctions support and help to delineate social rules that are both prescriptive and proscriptive, enjoining certain activity and forbidding other activity.

The relation between conversational order and the sanctions that regulate it seems somewhat different from the relation between other types of social order and the sanctions which regulate them. Unlike other kinds of social order, the sanctions employed in conversational order seem to be largely of the kind where moral approval or disapproval is immediately expressed and felt; little stress seems to be placed on sanctions of a more instrumental kind. Further, in conversational order, even more than in other social orders, the problem is to employ a sanction which will not destroy by its mere enactment the order which it is designed to maintain.

4. Any concrete social order must occur in a wider social context. The flow of action between the order and its social environment must come under regulation that is integrated into the order as such. Maintenance of this regulated relation depends on the maintenance of social order in the environment. On the whole, the stress here is on the negative sanctions enjoining non-interference, as opposed to the positive sanctions enjoining specific contributions exchanged between the order and its environment.²

This element in social order can be applied directly to the case of conversational interaction.

5. When the rules are not adhered to, or when no rules seem applicable, participants cease to know how to behave or what to expect from others. At the social level, the integration of the participants' actions breaks down and we have social disorganization or social disorder. At the same time, the participants suffer personal disorganization and anomie.

In the case of conversational interaction, weakening of rules results in disorganization that is usually experienced as embarrassment. The occurrence of embarrassment marks a point of confusion and disorientation; participants sense a false note in the situation. Embarrassed participants are said to be flustered, ill at ease, or to have lost countenance.

² This factor has recently been described by George C. Homans in *The Human Group* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), under the term "external systems." See especially pp. 86-94.

6. A person who breaks rules is an offender; his breaking of them is an offense. He who breaks rules continually is a deviant.

In the case of conversational interaction, he who breaks the rules is said to be *gauche*, *de trop*, or out of place. Offenses, or in other words acts which cause embarrassment, are said to be bricks, howlers, *gaffes*, *faux pas*, boners. (These acts, incidentally, provide us with an opportunity for studying the kinds of assumptions which underlie proper interaction behavior. These infractions of proper behavior provide us with a sort of situational news for directing our attention to the requirements of ordinary situations which would otherwise have gone unnoticed.) If an actor continuously breaks interaction rules, and especially if he does this in a wide variety of different interaction situations, we say he is a bore, a hopeless person, impossible. In the present study, deviants of this persistent kind will be called faulty persons.

7. When a rule is broken, the offender ought to feel guilty or remorseful, and the offended ought to feel righteously indignant.

In the case of conversational interaction, the guilt that the offender feels is described as shame. Shame will also be felt by those participants who have identified themselves with the offender, or who have defined themselves as personally responsible to theirs for the maintenance of order. Those who have been offended feel shocked, affronted, impatient.

8. An offense to or infraction of the social order calls forth emergency correctives which reestablish the threatened order, compensating for the damage done to it. These compensatory actions will tend to reinstate not only the work flow but also the moral norms which regulated it. Some of these correctives will also serve as negative sanctions against the offender.

In the case of conversational interaction, there is a set of adaptations to offense which protects the offended but which, in doing this, destroys the interaction order in which the protective action occurs. Thus, offended participants can react by withdrawing from the offender, or by ignoring him completely, or by shifting radically the understanding and social distances upon which the interaction is based. (All of these lines of adaption, incidentally, must rely upon the offender or improper actor to behave in a proper way as an object for these kinds of action; otherwise they can not be applied to him.)

Usually none of the drastic lines of action mentioned above are employed. Participants usually respond with toleration and forbearance to acts which offend against the interaction order. However tentative this accommodative response may be, it allows the interaction to be maintained, while corrections, if they are to be applied, can

be applied in a tactful way without destroying the interaction itself.³ Accommodative behavior takes the form of apparent acceptance as appropriate of the behavior of others; it gives rise to what might be called a working acceptance. Injuries to the working acceptance are avoided by means of protective strategies and haled by means of corrective strategies. Exercise of the strategies may be called tact.

9. Given the rules of the social order, we find that individual participants develop ruses and tricks for achieving the private ends that are proscribed by the rules, in such a way as not to break the rules.

In the case of conversational interaction, individuals employ what might be called gain strategies. These designs for action allow the individual to alter the working acceptance to suit his own ends, providing the alteration is sufficiently small or concealed so as not to jeopardize the working acceptance itself. Usually the strategist, in these cases, is interested in raising the definition that others present have of him and/or in lowering the definition they have of someone else who is present. In these situations, the working acceptance ceases to be an end or a means of action and becomes instead a framework of limiting conditions and boundaries of actions.

* * * * *

As a model, the concept of social order perhaps does not lead us to give sufficient stress to a crucial characteristic of conversational interaction, namely, the forbearance maintenance of a working acceptance. Let us explore this characteristic for a moment.

When persons find it necessary to exercise forbearance they usually feel hostile and resentful towards the person who requires this treatment. Those who forbear must accept, for a moment anyway, a public threat to interaction norms as well as to the evaluation of self which these norms help to protect. Certain defenses and strategies of a covert kind are employed through which the offended but forbearance actor may come to terms with his "real" feelings and with the public threats to them.

The forbearant actor may accept the injury to his private or real valuations, repress the experience, or keep it as separate as possible from the rest of his conscious life. He may sincerely try to redefine his private conceptions in order to make his demands consistent with the treatment he and the interaction receive. He may, at least to himself, define forbearance as an opportunistic means to the end of manipulating the offender, thus proving at least to himself that his public accommodative behavior is not a real expression of his valuations. He may covertly impute disqualifying attributes to the offender

³ Talcott Parsons makes the same point in *The Social System*, p. 303: "When we turn to the consideration of normal social interaction within such an institutionalized framework as a process of mutually influenced and contingent action we see that a process of social control is continually going on. Actors are continually doing and saying things which are more or less 'out of line,' such as by insinuation impugning someone's motives, or presuming too much. Careful observation will show that others in the situation often without being aware of it, tend to react to these minor deviances in such a way as to bring the deviant back 'into line,' by tactfully disagreeing with him, by a silence which underlines the fact that what he said was not acceptable, or very often by humor as a tension-release, as a result of which he comes to see himself more nearly as others see him. These minor control mechanisms are, it may be maintained, the way in which the institutionalized values are implemented in behavior. They are, on a certain level, the most fundamental mechanisms of all, and only when they break down does it become necessary for more elaborate and specialized mechanisms come into play."

so that the behavior of the offender and the treatment accorded the offense need not be taken seriously.⁴ He may tell himself that he will withdraw from communication and from the social relationship that gives rise to it as soon as it is polite to do so—thus allowing himself to feel that his forbearance is a sign of forbearance and nothing more. He may, finally, decide to tolerate the offensive behavior with the object in mind of sharply correcting the offender at a later time—a time when the offender will be obliged to accept the criticism in good grace.

The defenses we have been considering represent a form of what has been called intrapersonal communication.⁵ They may be effective even though they seldom give rise to overt action and interpersonal communication except, perhaps, during some subsequent interaction.

In conversational interaction, as opposed to many kinds of social order, offense is quite common; hence, forbearance is almost a constant requirement. The dissensus that forbearance conceals, as expressed in the many intrapersonal communications to which the necessity to exert forbearance gives rise, should be considered as part of the model for conversational interaction and not as something which occurs as a deviation from the model. For example, the exercise of gain strategies is so common a thing that it is often better to conceive of interaction not as a scene of harmony but as an arrangement for pursuing a cold war. A working acceptance may thus be likened to a temporary truce, a *modus vivendi* for carrying on negotiations and vital business.

It is interesting to note that a desire to maintain a working acceptance is, paradoxically enough, one of the few general bases of real consensus between persons. Individuals regularly act on the assumption that others are the sort of person who would attempt to maintain a working acceptance, and this imputation of an attribute is usually justified by consequent behavior. Persons, on the whole, can be relied upon to make every effort to avoid a "scene." In this context it may be added that many so-called empty gestures seem to serve primarily as signs that the sender is "responsible" and can be counted upon to play the social game of maintaining a surface agreement with and an acceptance of the others.

The very general tendency for persons to maintain a working acceptance during immediate communication must not lead us to make narrow assumptions concerning the motivation of this behavior. An actor may attempt to maintain the appearance of agreement in order to save the situation and minimize embarrassment, or in order to be genuinely indulgent to the offender, or in order to exploit the offender in some way.

We must also be careful to keep in mind the truism that persons

⁴ An extreme example is found among primary-school children who behave themselves in the required manner, while crossing their fingers or muttering to themselves denials and ritual profanations of the person to whose standards they must show forbearance.

⁵ Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson, *Communication* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1951), pp. 199–203 and 278–279.

who are present are treated very differently from persons who are absent. Persons who treat each other with consideration while in each other's immediate presence regularly show not the slightest consideration for each other in situations where acts of deprivation cannot be immediately and incontestably identified as to source by the person who is deprived by these acts. The kind of consideration shown for persons who are not present is a special problem and is not dealt with in this study.

The use of the social order model in studying conversational interaction is inadequate in certain other ways, to be considered later.