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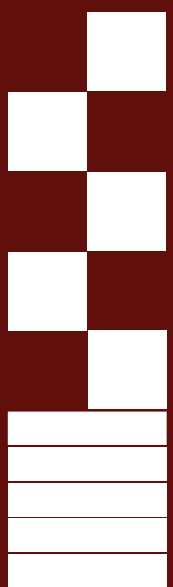
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

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

By

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Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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In Chapter VIII the phrase "in range" was used to describe the position of anyone who was within the zone in which reception of a given impulse was possible. In many cases, all those who are in range of a particular communication are also its accredited recipients.[1] This is true, for example, when two persons stop to talk to each other on an otherwise deserted road or in an otherwise empty room, or when all the persons in a hall are being addressed by a speaker. When all the persons who are in reception range of an interplay are also accredited participants in it, we shall speak of physical closure.

When four or more persons are together in the same bounded region, they may separate off into more than one cluster or grouping, with each cluster maintaining a separate and distinct interplay. If the size of the region is great enough relative to the number of persons in it, it is possible for voices to be modulated downward and for the space of the region to be apportioned so that each interplay in the region is physically closed.[2] This guarantees that no interplay will either be overheard by unaccredited recipients or be a disturbance for other interplays in the region. The same effect is sometimes approximated when the sound intensity of voices is modulated upwards so that the reception of a particular interplay is jammed for all persons not in the interplay. This kind of communication arrangement is found in crowded pubs and bars, and on streets where the noise level is high.

Sometimes, however, physical closure is not possible, and an interplay proceeds on the understanding that persons are in range who are not accredited as participants. Seating arrangements in cafeterias often produce circumstances of this kind. In any case, persons who involuntarily find themselves in range of an interplay convey (by appropriate undirected cues) that they are paying no attention to the message which they are in a position to overhear. As previously suggested, the accredited participants sometimes return the courtesy by censoring their own messages for words that might provide too much

[1] Some cases where this is not true have been touched on in the discussion of indelicate communication chapter vi.

[2] In small interplays physical closure can almost be guaranteed by whispering. In Dixon, as in many other places, however, whispering is considered ill-mannered and does not frequently occur. It constitutes a disturbance for persons in other interplays; it signifies that something is being specifically concealed from them. (This is also true of the use of codes, the spelling-out of messages, and the use of dialect; see the discussion in chapter viii.)

temptation for the outsider or that might cause him offense should he happen to fail to keep his attention withdrawn. Communication arrangements of this kind constitute what might be called "effective closure."[3] Hotel lounges in Bergand very frequently provide the scene for this kind of arrangement. The desire to sit close to the fireplace (this may almost be considered a tropism in Britain) makes it necessary for participants in different interplays to locate themselves close to one another. Conversation is restricted to innocuous general topics, or to domestic ones carried on by brief, affectless allusions that have little meaning except to the accredited participants.

Effective closure is an arrangement by which accredited participants of an interplay can act as if they were not being overheard. In formally organized social occasions, effective closure is sometimes facilitated by use of symbolic boundaries around areas within a region. The roping off of a section of a hall sometimes has this effect. For example, the music for dances held in the Dixon community hall is played on the stage of the hall by accordionists and pianists recruited from the dancers. Once on the stage, the performers talk among themselves with a mood and "ethos" peculiar to them, as if their absolute difference in function and appreciable difference in physical elevation had produced a physical barrier to ordinary communication with the dancers.[4]

Another example is to be found in the primary-grade schoolroom in Dixon. Here groups of pupils of several different stages in schooling must be taught in the same room. While a section in one grouping of seats is being taught something on the board, other sections, in other groupings of seats, act as if they are not in a position to overhear the instructions and questions occurring a short distance away from them. Effective closure is thus maintained, although negative sanctions on the part of the teacher are sometimes required to keep a pupil busy with his own work while instruction is being given to someone else close to him. Sometimes the difference in ethos or climate between different but adjacent sections becomes great. Subjects such as drawing require a certain amount of movement on the part of pupils in order that they may exchange limited equipment among themselves and compare efforts, and discipline during these times is relatively lax. So effective can closure become, however, that half the room can be involved in the relatively relaxed yet humming atmosphere of the drawing period, while the other half of the room can be the scene for lessons which require rather continuous attention to the instructions of the teacher. Interestingly enough, the blackboard (which is about six feet long and four feet high, reversible, and mounted on casters) is frequently used as a symbolic barrier. Pupils at one stage in schooling will be set to do sums on one side of the

[3] Participation in an interplay from which one has been effectively excluded is apparently in some sense a safe thing to handle. An extreme illustration of this is provided by Morris Schwartz, "Social Interaction of a Disturbed Ward of a Hospital," (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1951), p. 94, in reference to the conduct of a schizophrenic patient: "... the patient reveals that she is able to focus on others when she is not involved herself and when she feels unobserved in the process. In situations in which this occurs and she discovers she is being observed, she quickly turns her attention inward."

[4] For further illustrations of this kind of behavior among musicians, see Howard S. Becker, "The Professional Dance Musician in Chicago" (Unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1949).

board, and a different group of pupils will be set to copying script written by the teacher on the other side of the board.

It should be noted that effective closure is apparently very difficult to arrange and maintain when the accredited participants enclose among them, ecologically speaking, a person who is not an accredited participants.[5] (In the case of two-person interplay, this area would tend to be reduced to the line of communication between the two accredited participants; an unaccredited participant who intersects this line, blocking the path of vision between the two accredited participants, is almost certain to cause some embarrassment and to feel some.)

We have described two ways in which a person may find himself excluded from an interplay; he may be physically outside its range, or he may be effectively outside its range. A third possibility exists. He may be treated[6] as a non-person, that is, as someone for whom no consideration need be taken. A vivid illustration of this kind of treatment is given by Orwell in his discussion of how patients in a French charity hospital were treated and, reciprocally, how they behaved:

> On the other hand if you had some disease with which the students wanted to familiarize themselves you got plenty of attention of a kind. I myself, with an exceptionally fine specimen of a bronchial rattle, sometimes had as many as a dozen students queuing up to listen to my chest. It was a very queer feeling—queer, I mean, because of their intense interest in learning their job, together with a seeming lack of any perception that the patients were human beings. It is strange to relate, but sometimes as some young student stepped forward to take his turn at manipulating you, he would be actually tremulous with excitement, like a boy who has at last got his hands on some expensive piece of machinery. And then ear after ear—ears of young men, of girls, of Negroes—pressed against your back, relays of fingers solemnly but clumsily tapping, and not from any one of them did you get a word of conversation or a look direct in your face. As a non-paying patient, in the uniform nightshirt, you were primarily a *specimen*, a thing I did not resent but could never quite get used to. . . . About a dozen beds away from me was Numéro 57—I think that was his number—a cirrhosis of the liver case. Everyone in the ward knew him by sight because he was sometimes the subject of a medical lecture. On two afternoons a week the tall, grave doctor would lecture in the ward to a party of students, and on more than one occasion old Numéro 57 was wheeled in on a sort of trolley into the middle of the ward, where the doctor would roll back his nightshirt, dilate with his fingers a huge flabby protuberance on the man's belly—the diseased liver, I suppose—and explain solemnly that this was a disease attributable to alcoholism, commoner in the wine-drinking countries. As usual he neither spoke to his patient nor gave him a smile, a nod or any kind of recognition. While he talked, very grave and upright, he would hold the wasted body beneath his two hands, sometimes giving

[5] An exception may be cited. The interplay conducted in gesture language by the deaf and dumb provides some interesting communication characteristics, and the conventions under which it is conducted differ, apparently, in some ways from spoken interplay. For one thing, clearance interchanges seem to be more difficult to manage, and signs such as tugging at another's arm or clothing seem to be more commonly employed. Furthermore, in regions where there is a high noise level, intimate and easy spoken communication among normal speakers seems to be out of place, and speakers tend to restrict their talk to messages that are strictly required for the action at hand; deaf-mutes, on the other hand, may conduct intimate extended interplay under these circumstances. Also, since their interplays produce no disturbing sounds, and can be understood by few, deaf-mutes seem to feel free to conduct extended intimate conversation in public conveyances such as street-cars, even though the participants may be seated relatively far apart from each other. Presumably such communication neither interferes with spoken communication that might be going on at the time, nor does it force non-participants to listen to messages which they do not wish to hear and for whose reception they have not been accredited.

[6] In the realm of undirected communication, an interesting closure problem arises because of windows. In Dixon, as in many other communities in Western society, one is supposed tactfully not to make use of any opportunity to look into a room by looking into its windows. One is supposed to act as if a physical barrier to sight *completely*, not merely partially, surrounded the room. On occasions where a person does look into a cottage window he usually warns the inhabitants by means of a knock that he is doing so. Apparently one source of hostility to foreign seamen is that they do not obey this communication rule. They are said to wander up to a cottage and gaze into it through the window, doing nothing and saying nothing for minutes at a time, apparently unconcerned with the privacy rights of the inhabitants. Islanders consider this to be uncivilized behavior.

> it a gentle roll to and fro, in just the attitude of a woman handling a rolling-pin. Not that Numéro 57 minded this kind of thing. Obviously he was an old hospital inmate, a regular exhibit at lectures, his liver long since marked down for a bottle in some pathological museum. Utterly uninterested in what was said about him, he would lie with his colorless eyes gazing at nothing, while the doctor showed him off like a piece of antique china.[7]

[7] George Orwell, "How the Poor Die," in *Shooting an Elephant*, p. 22, p. 24.

We are familiar with treatment of a person as virtually absent in many situations. Domestic servants and waitresses, in certain circumstances, are treated as not present and act, ritually speaking, as if they were not present.[8] The young and, increasingly, the very old, may be discussed "to their faces" in the tone we would ordinarily use for a person only if he were not present. Mental patients are often given similar non-person treatment.[9] Finally, there is an increasing number of technical personnel who are given this status (and take the non-person alignment) at formally organized interplays. Here we refer to stenographers, cameramen, reporters, plainclothes guards, and technicians of all kinds.

[8] Bertram Doyle, *The Etiquette of Race Relations in the South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), p. 19 and p. 39, describes how slaves who were waiting on their master's table would be expected to participate in the table conversation if bidden to, thus giving sudden recognition to the fact that they were expected to follow the conversation, their status being too low to make illicit overhearing a sociological possibility. As non-persons they could also walk into a white church service to give their master a message, without being defined as an interruption. This is seen today in the rule that a "good" personal maid does not rap at a door before entering. Another illustration of non-person treatment of Negroes is given by Mrs. Trollope, *Domestic Mappers of the Americans* (2 vols.; London: Whittaker, Trencher, & Co., 1832), II, 56–57: "I had, indeed, frequent opportunities of observing this habitual indifference to the presence of their slaves. They talk of them, or their condition, of their faculties, of their conduct, exactly as if they were incapable of hearing. I once saw a young lady, who, when seated at table between a male and a female, was induced by her modesty to intrude on the chair of her female neighbor to avoid the indelicacy of touching the elbow of *a man*. I once saw this very young lady lacing her stays with the most perfect composure before a negro footman. A Virginian gentleman told me that ever since he had married, he had been accustomed to have a negro girl sleep in the same chamber with himself and his wife. I asked for what purpose this nocturnal attendance was necessary? 'Good Heaven!' was the reply, 'if I wanted a glass of water during the night, what would become of me.'"

In Dixon, treatment as a non-person occurred in several different kinds of situations. Some examples may be given.

1. There was a rule that the doors of the community hall were to be left open during times when functions were being held in the hall and that anyone who wandered in at these times had a right to stay if he conducted himself "properly." Often, on nights when billiards were being held, foreign fishermen whose boat happened to be anchored in the harbor would walk down to the hall and stay for a while in the billiard room, watching the players. On these occasions, the islanders present in the billiard room would continue with their game and conversation as if the intruders who were present were not present at all. The foreign-speaking visitors would not be nodded to, or spoken to, or even closely looked at. An attempt would be made by the islanders to act as if no constraint or influence had been caused by the presence of the visitors.[10] In fact, of course, players became a little self conscious and demonstrated that they were concerned about intruders by cursing them when they were sighted coming towards the hall or leaving the hall. Such cases seem to suggest that there are two types of non-person treatment, a simple kind that occurs when a person present is excluded from consideration in an automatic, unthinking way because of his low ceremonial status, and a more complex kind that occurs when a person is excluded from consideration as a means by which others present can consciously and concertedly convey their dislike of him. The more complex kind of non-person treatment is sometimes called "the silent treatment" and in some situations constitutes an extremely brutal sanction.

[9] An illustration of non-person treatment is given by Schwartz in his study

2. Household maids, in Dixon, were recruited from the upper reaches of the crofter class to serve in the homes of the gentry and in the hotel. These maids, typically unmarried girls between the ages to fifteen and twenty-five, were usually related in more than one capacity to those whom they served. At ceremonial occasions such as weddings, at community socials, at church, at auction sales, in the shops, servers interacted on a relatively convivial and equalitarian basis with those whom they served. In this sense there were "personal relations" between employer and employee. Thus, when a maid waited on a table in the home of a member of the gentry or in the hotel, those who were waited on would occasionally attempt to bring the maid into the table conversation as an accredited though temporary participant. Occasionally, too, instead of bringing the maid into the conversation, those at table would introduce a momentary lull into their conversation, taking it up after the maid had left the room, or would tactfully limit linguistic messages to the kind that would give the involuntary eavesdropper neither offense nor the feeling that hushed secrets were being kept from her. And of course maids tended to cooperate in maintaining this effective closure by not paying apparent attention to what was being said at table and by not tarrying too long too close to the table.

However it was also very common for gentry and hotel guests to treat those who waited on them as if they were non-persons. In accepting food or allowing plates to be taken away, those being waited upon would often utter a very brief thank-you or extend a small smile to the maid, but no interruption in the table conversation would be produced.[11] Non-interruption was facilitated by the presence of table bells and table buzzers, these allowing persons at the table to summon a maid without having to withdraw even momentarily as sender or recipient in the mealtime conversation. Treatment of the maids as non-persons was apparently facilitated by obliging them to wear black dresses, pennies, dark shoes, and hair nets, this costume apparently making it easier to view the maid in a highly segmental capacity. More important than these factors, perhaps, was the practice of those at table to say things in the presence of maids that were obviously offensive to the groups with which the maids were identified, or to say things of an intimate nature that would ordinarily be kept from the ears of an outsider. For, example, one afternoon at lunch the new doctor said, while a maid was present:

> I wish I knew some psychology, but I don't know if psychology would apply to a preliterate people. They have nothing whatever in their minds. I don't know, they may be queer because of the food and air.

The point here is not that untactful things are said "in front" of maids, but that these offenses may symbolize for the server and for

of the communication conduct of the mentally ill, *op. cit.*, p. 174: "The extent to which patients in Class (1) [socially most withdrawn] become 'non-existent' and 'do not count' in the eyes of other patients is revealed in the following. Mrs. Stillman had, according to her statement, 'something very confidential and important' to reveal to the investigator. She looked around the ward for a place in which she could talk to him alone. It appeared that the living room was empty, and she invited him to talk there. Upon entering it, she discovered Miss Adams sitting and twirling a thread. Mrs. Stillman stopped and said, 'Oh, Ann's in here,' and then carried on (with a shrug of the shoulder as if to say 'she really doesn't matter') to reveal the confidential matter to the investigator."

[10] A further illustration may be quoted from George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London: Decker am Warburg, 1949), pp. 180–181: "Once the lodging-house was invaded by a slumming-party. Paddy and I had been out, and, coming back in the afternoon, we heard sounds of music downstairs. We went down to find three gentlepeople, sleekly dressed, holding a religious service in our kitchen. They were a grave and reverend seignior in a frock coat, a lady sitting at a portable harmonium, and a chinless youth toying with a crucifix. It appeared that they had marched in and started to hold the service, without any kind or invitation whatever. It was a pleasure to see how the lodgers met this intrusion. They did not offer the smallest rudeness to the slummers; they just ignored them. By common consent everyone in the kitchen—a hundred men, perhaps—behaved as though the slummers had not existed. There they stood patiently singing and exhorting, and no more notice was taken of them than if they had been earwigs. The gentleman in the frock coat preached a sermon, but not a word of it was audible; it was drowned in the usual din of songs, oaths and the clattering of pans. Men sat at their meals and card games three feet away from the harmonium, peaceably ignoring it. Presently the slummers gave it up and cleared out, not insulted in any way, but merely disregarded. No doubt they consoled themselves by thinking how brave they had been, 'freely venturing into the lowest dens,' etc. etc."

the served that the server is not someone whose feelings, as a person who is present, need be taken into consideration. The maids in Dixon, incidentally, did not seem to be so thoroughly trained to their calling as to accept this role.[12] They tell exemplary tales of times when they have interrupted a dinner conversation and "told a guest what for," shifting their role in this way from non-person to person. As one maid said:

> They say things in front of me as if I'm not there and I don't know whether they mean me to hear or not. Last year the breakfasts were only egg and bread and butter and porridge and once a week bacon and I told them [the hotel owners] what they said about it and now they have three and sometimes four course breakfasts. But some things they say I don't tell anyone, not even Alice [her co-worker and closest friend].

3. When the doctor visited the cottage of a sick crofter, treatment of him varied quite widely. Sometimes he would be treated with great ceremony, sometimes by means of a joking relationship. These kinds of treatment will be considered later. On occasion, however, the difficulty of putting the doctor in a relationship that would permit interaction to continue seemed to be too great, and those in the cottage (except for the sick person) would merely ignore the presence of the doctor. Sometimes, especially if the visit came when a meal was being eaten, and when the fare and the equipment was there for the doctor to see, crofters would be unable to maintain the strategy of ignoring him while proceeding with their own interaction, and would fumble with their food or stop short in eating it, poised in readiness for the doctor's leavetaking.

A similar means of handling a person with whom interaction would be difficult to manage was practiced by workers in the mill, quarry, and loading dock. Sometimes when the boss, Mr. Allen, came on his periodic tours of inspection, and caught them during a moment's break for a brief chat, they would act as if he was not in fact there and would continue, albeit self-consciously, with their talk.

4. During community socials it seemed that children were disciplined and corrected only if they threatened to disrupt radically the adult activity in progress. (This leniency was in line with the general permissiveness which seemed to be shown toward children in Bergand.) During a period when the audience was involved in listening to choral singing, the children between the ages of about four and seven would scamper down the aisles between the rows of seated adults, playing tag. At a moment when an auctioneer was selling objects to adults present, using the stage for his stand, children sometimes "tested the limits" by crawling across the front of the stage. During a dance, children would cut through the dancers in pursuit of

[11] Even this minimal consideration may become subject to question in cases of non-person treatment. For example, at the 1952 political conventions in Chicago, guest speakers were wildly cheered at the moment when they came up to the podium. When in a position to respond to the audience, it was necessary for a technician to slide in past the speakers in order to adjust the microphone through which they were to speak. The question arose as to whether speakers, in the center of world-wide attention, were to withdraw momentarily from their reception of the ovation to acknowledge the technician whose body was brushing past theirs and to thank him for adjusting the microphone to their requirements. Some speakers attempted to treat the technician at least for a second or two as a person; other speakers tried to solve the problem by treating the technician at all times as a non-person. No solution seemed completely to fit the situation.

[12] It may be noted that cab drivers in our society have a similar problem. Two "fares" in the back seat may treat the driver as a non-person and engage in quite intimate conversations and activities. The driver is sometimes left with a feeling that he is somehow not being treated properly.

a balloon or of a friend. In these instances, adults attempted as long as possible to overlook the presence of children who were not paying attention to the action in progress, and while the children no doubt were partly motivated in their actions by a desire to attract adult attention, the children on the whole seemed to express the feeling that it was perfectly proper to be in the midst of organized social interaction and yet not pay attention to it or be treated as persons who ought to pay attention. On occasions such as the Christmas party, however, young children were not allowed to play out the role of non-person and were coaxed into participating in children's games as an official part of the festivity.