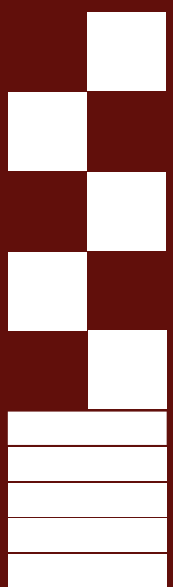
1953

Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman



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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.baaa50af

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CONTROL NUMBER 2022951441

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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In an earlier part of this study, it was suggested that communication, seen as a physical process, provides many events that are well adapted to serve as expressions, witting or unwitting, especially expressions of the evaluative judgment that participants make of one another. As one type of communication arrangement, an interplay provides many vehicles for carrying information about the judgments participants make of one another. Of course, an event which is well designed to express such evaluations may not come to act in this way, and an event which does come to be expressive in this way may not be employed by anyone as a source of information. Furthermore, a vehicle which commonly carries information of one kind in one culture may carry a different meaning in another culture. In this chapter some of the frequent sources of expression in interplay will be considered.

1. One source of expression during interplay is to be found in the manner in which recipients attend to the sender. Chesterfield's view of this matter is interesting:

> There is nothing so brutally shocking, nor so little forgiven, as a seeming inattention to the person who is speaking to you; and I have known many a man knocked down for (in my opinion) a much slighter provocation than that shocking inattention which I mean. I have seen many people who, while you are speaking to them, instead of looking at, and attending to you, fix their eyes upon the ceiling, or some other part of the room, look out of the window, play with a dog, twirl their snuff-box, or pick their nose. Nothing discovers a little, futile, frivolous mind more than this, and nothing is so offensively ill-bred; it is an explicit declaration on your part that every, the most trifling, object deserves your attention more than all that can be said by the person who is speaking to you. Judge of the sentiments of hatred and resentment which such treatment must excite in every breast where any degree of self-love dwells, and I am sure I never yet met with that breast where there was not a great deal. I repeat it again and again (for it is highly necessary for you to remember it) that sort of vanity and self-love is inseparable from human nature, whatever may be its rank or condition; even your footman will sinner forget and forgive a beating, than any

> manifest mark of slight and contempt. Be therefore, I beg of you, not only really, but seemingly and manifestly, attentive to whoever speaks to you; nay more, take their tone, and tune yourself to their unison. Be serious with the serious, gay with the gay, and trifle with the triplets. In assuming these various shapes, ends our to make each of them seem to sit easy upon you, and even to appear to be your own natural one. This is true and useful versatility, of which a thorough knowledge of the world at once teaches the utility, and the means of acquiring.[1]

[1] *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son*, pp. 261–262.

2. In the literature, some attention has been given to the fact that lulls in conversation or frequent interruptions express something significant about the relation of the participants. Chapple and Coon have suggested that:

> The degree of adjustments between two individuals may be measured in terms of the amount of synchronization between their action and silences. When two persons are able to interact, within the normal limits of their interaction rates, in such a way that they do not interrupt each other frequently and that neither fails to respond when the other stops talking, they are well adjusted, . . . the disturbing effects of interruptions and failures to respond produce changes in the sympathetic nervous system which the physiologists describe as pain, fear, and range.[2]

[2] E. D. Chapple and C. S. Coon, *Principles of Anthropology* (New York: Holt, 1942), p. 39

And a clinical study by Chapple and Lindemann shows that "double action" and double silence occur very little among normals but much more frequently among the disordered.[3] In the case of improper lulls in the interaction, it is to be noted that the impression made by lulls on those who must experience them varies a great deal from one type of interplay to another. In Dixon, in formally organized interplays such as those occurring during a concert, lulls created by the failure of one performer to follow another rapidly enough, or the lull caused by the failure of volunteer musicians to appear at the time dancing was to have begun, caused some disorder and strain, but on the whole such lulls were taken in stride as an expression of the incompetence of those who had been chosen to run the concert. On the other hand, lulls which occurred during informal "ad hoc" interplay seemed to be a more serious thing; they tended to be taken as an expression of the fact that the participants had too little "in common" to justify informal social intercourse.

[3] E. D. Chapple, and E. Lindemann, "Clinical Implications of Interaction Rates in Psychiatric Interviews," *Human Organization*, I, 111

3. Of the many different sources of expression in interplay, students of interaction seem to have given most consideration to forms of what might be referred to as "attention quota," that is, the relative amount of time during which a given participant acts as a sender, or the relative number of messages he sends. Chapple and Coon have suggested that each person has a demand level for attention which is peculiar to him and which he tries to establish in all of his interplays.[4] One student, in discussing the casual coming together

[4] Chapple and Coon, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

of persons in brief conversation, says, "Our earlier experience had indicated a very strong relationship between decision-winning or leadership and talking-time in ad hoc groups for four persons."[5] Another student has reported a correlation of .93 between the time a participant in an eight-man "group" spent talking and the votes he received from observers for having demonstrated leadership.[6]

Students interested in the expressive significance of attention quota have quite frequently employed this factor as an index of a rather complex variable, namely, "informal status within the group."[7] The drawback of this approach is that often participants also realize that attention quota is a significant expression and attempt to increase or decrease the number or length of the messages they send, in an effort to control the impression that they feel their actions give. Perhaps a less famous expression of rank within the interplay, such as the quote of time or times during which a given participant is the addressed recipient, would provide a more reliable index.[8]

In any case, it is convenient to think of the granting of attention as a kind of indulgence, for in this way we can better appreciate that esteem for the sender is merely one of the reasons we might have for granting him our attention.

In Dixon, the use of attention quote as a general measure of informal leadership or esteem was grossly inadequate in certain contexts. Three of these may be mentioned.

First, the occurrence of something special to a particular participant—a birthday, a minor accident, an achievement, etc.—tended for a time to place the participant in the focus of attention and make him the central object of reference. (Of course, it may well have been that the lower a participant's usual position, the more drastic must be the special event that enables him to monopolize attention.)

Secondly, persons who were too far removed from the commoners to find a place within their ranking structure were frequently accorded long period of ungrudging attention. Small children, strangers, gentry, kittens, chronic misbehaviors—all these qualified for attention indulgence. This patter of treatment, incidentally, seemed also to be extended sometimes to persons who "ought to have known better," but who none the less attempted to obtain more attention than was fitting for them. On such occasions the offender was led into taking even more attention than he may have wanted, for which unknowingly paid the price of being classified along with children, cats, and strangers.

Thirdly, during formally organized recreation, persons frequently seemed to act in capacities which they did not judge as important and hence seemed not much concerned over the allocation of attention at these times. Thus, at the semi-annual concerts, the esteem in

[5] F. L. Strodbeck. "Husband and Wife Interaction," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, XVI (468–473), 469.

[6] B. M. Bass, "An Analysis of Leaderless Group Discussion," *J. of Applied Psych.*, XXXIII, 527–533, especially pp. 531–532.

[7] Leon Festinger and John Thibaut, "Interpersonal Communication in Small Groups," *Theory and Experiment in Social Communication*, by Leon Festinger and Others (Ann Arbor: Edwards Bros., 1952), pp. 37–49, especially p. 44, claim to have shown that a large volume of communication may be directed to and originate from a participant who violently disagrees with other participants. Attention quota in such cases would probably not be an index of "status" in the interplay. Bales, "The Equilibrium Problem in Small Groups," *Working Papers in the Theory of Action*, by Talcott Parsons, Robert F. Bales, and Edward A. Shils (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953), p. 131, cogently argues that the supposition that high attention quota is related to status is at least a good working assumption, for it causes us to examine critically any deviation from this rule.

[8] There are, of course, many other expressions of differential evaluation within an interplay, some of these stressing the rank of the participant within the interplay and some stressing more the rank of the participant in the wider social world. For example, when two participants attempt to reply at the same time to a sender's message, the participant who is the more highly esteemed of the two is often according the right to proceed. Sometimes, of course, this introduces an untactful show of superiority, and an attempt may be made to resolve the sign tension by allowing the first of the respondents to have the floor. In Dixon, when two persons start to answer a third and appear to have started at exactly the same time, a brief moment of disorganization follows, often terminated in laughter.

which a particular performer was held in the community at large (as a person, not as a performer) did not seem to influence very much the willingness of the audience to accord the performer her attention. In fact, games such as whist or "beetle" formally incorporated the right for each participant to have either equal attention indulgence or an equal chance of receiving a large amount of this indulgence.

When the above mentioned qualifications were not operative, attention time tended to be an indulgence in Dixon, and an indulgence that persons were felt to deserve according to their rank in the interplay. It seemed, however, that in addition to the relative factor an absolute one was operative. In two-person interplay, no cases were observed where the subordinate did not have the right to convey some messages. The statement-reply nature of communication would itself have operated in this direction. As the number of participants increased, however, the number of messages thought proper for a particular participant seemed to decrease more than proportionately. The indulgence involved in receiving the attention of more than three or four persons seemed to be considered so great a thing that more than a moment of it was frequently thought to be a presumption on the part of the person who obtained. A point seems to be reached where even those of high status in the interplay feel that it is presumptuous or dangerous for them to accept the focus of attention for more than a moment.[9] Perhaps this may help us to account for the fact that has been widely cited in the literature, namely, that informal interplays of more than five persons tend to be unstable and tend to suffer a cleavage into two or more small interplays.[10] Perhaps this may also help to throw light on some of the social functions of organizing some interplays in a formal way, suggesting that a formally selected sender acting in a formally designated and limited capacity does not have to rely on his own personality and general status as a warrant for the attention he receives and can therefore accept with impunity the attention of many persons.

During informal interplay in Dixon, when the sender in one small conversational cluster suddenly received the attention of members of a neighboring cluster, embarrassment frequently resulted and the sender frequently terminated his message in a rapid and somewhat disorganized way. With one class of exceptions, only one instance was observed where a talker was willing to accept the attention of a relatively larger number of listeners for more than a few seconds. At a dinner party of twenty-five, a man made a comment to his neighbors on the political situation, and after answering a question raised by a person at the other end of the table went on to air his views to the whole room. However, he was a man famous in the community for playing communication tricks; he seemed to have sensed, on this

[9] Apparently one solution for this problem is for a sender rigorously to direct his message to a particular participant, often the informal leader, as a means both of obtaining extra legitimacy for his demands and at the same time providing a simulation of a two-person interplay.

[10] See, for example, John James, "A Preliminary Study of the Size Determinant in Small Group Interaction," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, XVI, 474–477, especially p. 476.

occasion, that many listeners felt embarrassed, but he talked to the whole table in spite of it.

The class of exceptions observed regarding size limitation on informal interplay pertains to the institution of "story telling" which is found in Bergand and a few other Britain's islands. When from about six to about fifteen men gather in a room, a person reknowned [*sic*] as a story teller may be persuaded to settle back and tell a tale. Tales usually have to do with more heroic days, when sailing vessels were still employed and when the harbor in Dixon was filled with crafts. The story tellers seemed to be able to handle the attention they received with exquisite poise and balance, injecting enough personal involvement and reference to keep attention alive, and yet doing this in such a way that the indulgence of the listeners was transferred from the story teller to the past about which he was talking. In Dixon, the idea that there might be a communication arrangement half way between informal interplay on one hand and formally organized interplay on the other seemed to be dying, and only a few old men still seemed to appreciate that the institution of story telling required a special skill and manner and involved a special communication license with respect to attention indulgence.

4. One source of expression in interplay is to be found in a person's entrance into or initiation of an interplay and in his manner of leaving or terminating it.[11] An illustration may be taken from an early American etiquette book, where conduct with respect to conversational clusters at parties is considered:

> If a lady and gentleman are conversing together at an evening party, it would be a rudeness for another person to go up and interrupt them by introductions a new topic of conversation. If you are sure that there is nothing of a particular and private interest passing between them, you may *join* their conversation and strike into the current of their remarks; yet if you then find that they are so much engaged and entertained by the discussion that they were holding together, as to render the termination or the change of its character unwelcome, you should withdraw. If, however, two persons are occupied with one another upon what you guess to be terms peculiarly delicate and particular, you should entirely withhold yourself from their company. If you are talking to a lady with the ordinary indifference of a common acquaintance, and are only waiting till some one else comes up, for an opportunity to leave her, you should not move the instant another reminds, for that would look as if your previous tarrying had been compulsory, but you should remain a few moments and then turn away.[12]

It is to be noted that participation status in an interplay involves important rights and obligations. In general, accredited status in the same interplay puts persons in an extremely good position to convey linguistic and expressive information to one another. In a sense,

[11] There are analogous rules for guiding initiation and entrance, withdrawal and termination in the case of social occasions. For example, in some social circles in our society it is felt that early leavetaking is a possible affront to those remaining, and there is a formalized rule that no one may leave until the highest-ranking person makes a visible move to do so. In other circles in our society, it is understood that the more intimate the relationship between a particular guest at a party and his host, the longer it is proper for him to stay, and that guests on more distance terms with the host ought to leave in time to give more intimately related guests an opportunity of being alone with the host.

[12] *The Canons of Good Breeding: or the Handbook of the Man of Fashion* (Philadelphia: Lee and Blanchard, 1839), pp. 68–69.

shared status of this kind opens persons up to one another. We can therefore appreciate why persons are usually interested in seeking or avoiding accredited participation with specific other persons. Perhaps, therefore, we can also understand why it is that any alternation in the likelihood or probability of two persons entering into interplay with one another tends to be marked by ceremony of some kind.

It is to be noted, further, that persons who enter into interplay with each other tend to show more accommodative consideration of one another than they would have been had they not entered together into the interplay.[13] This fact seems to be especially true of sender and recipient.[14]

Since joint participation makes persons available to each other it is not surprising that we find that rules exist for determining who may break into conversational interplay with whom, and under what circumstances this may be done. In general, in our society, it seems that we have a right to bring a person into interplay or a right to enter an interplay that is already in progress to the degree that our action cannot be construed as an effort to reduce social distance or improperly acquire strategic information. If the interplay is patently going to be brief, then strangers can accost each other, as when one persons asks another for directions, or a match, or the time. If visible proof is not available that the interplay will not involve participants in entangling alliances, then, at least in our cities, strangers do not quite have the right to engage each other in conversation. It may be noted that the institution of "introduction" in our society establishes between persons, in many cases, the right and the obligations of entering into interplay with each other whenever this becomes a physical possibility, even if the possibility is quite unexpected. It may also be noted that certain social occasions in our society, such as informal social parties, give all those present, by virtue of their presence, the right to enter or be called into any interplay in progress or to initiate interplay with anyone present.

In Dixon, as in many other rural regions in Western society, all adults of like sex have the right and obligation of momentarily entering into interplay with each other when passing on the road or field.[15] These interplays are required to be positively toned and accommodative. A difficulty frequently arose, therefore, between persons who are antagonistic to one another. To enter into interaction with an enemy tended to call forth more accommodation than one wanted. To refuse to enter into interaction when obviously in a position to do so tended to signify too great an insult.[16] Hence, between gentry and crofter, and between crofters who had "fallen out" with each other, avoidance relationships were sometimes practised as a solution to the problem. Persons hostile to one another tended to avoid

[13] Knowledge of this fact is exploited by "stemmers" or street salesmen who force persons into conversational interaction without waiting for a justifiable or proper pretext for doing so. The stemmer then phrases his salestalk or "pitch" in such a way that the potential customer must open contradict the salesman if a sale is to be avoided. In order not to have to contradict someone "to his face" and in order to terminate what is in any case an improper interplay, potential customers frequently agree to the sale.

[14] Since a sender need be more careful, ritually speaking, of an addressed recipient than an unaddressed recipient, senders sometimes attempt to convey a remark for which there are unaddressed recipients, or even persons who are forced into the role of effectively excluded overhearers, but for which there is pointedly no addressed recipient. We sometimes call this communication arrangement "talking into the air." On the island, when an individual wished to expression an opinion which he could not quite bring himself to convey to an addressed recipient, he would sometimes address his remark to the kitchen cat, or to a small child, or "into the air" in a ruminative, editorializing and inwardly directed spirit. Similarly, on the island as elsewhere in Western society, a closely related pair of persons, such as husband and wife, will sometimes wait for the presence of a third person before voicing criticism or approval of the other member of the pair. A third person can be used as an addressed recipient and be told things that the talked-about member of the pair can accept as an unaddressed recipient but not as an addressed recipient. The presence of this kind of leeway is one of the factors which distinguishes three-person interplay from two-person interplay.

[15] The few exceptions to this rule are considered later in another context.

each other's eyes if possible and not to frequent the same place at the same time.

Once persons have entered together into interplay, termination of the interplay commonly becomes a delicate matter. If one participant withdraws before the others do, this act is often taken, justifiably or not, as an expression of the departed one's attitude to those remaining. This possibility causes some persons to be leary about initiating interplays which they do not have a ready means for terminating. In official circles, where highly sacred participants must be protected, termination of an interplay (and a social occasion) is signaled by the leavetaking of the highest-ranking participant, others not leaving until that participant does.

The eventual necessity for every interplay to terminate constitutes a sign situation; whether or not participants desire it, something will probably be taken to have been expressed. There are several standard strategies for resolving this sign dilemma.

First, allowances are made for clearcut extenuating circumstances. Thus, on the island, a housewife whose soup boiled over could rely on the noise and smell to make good her leavetaking and could be sure that her hasty departure would be tolerated. Messages bearing painful tidings could also be relied upon as a sufficient pretext to leave a conversation or an occasion.

Secondly, the leavetaker may strongly confirm to the participants that the self that is leaving is not, in a sense, the self that the leavetaker thinks most highly of. By apologizing profusely, or by offering an excuse which clearly puts him on the side of those remaining and in opposition to the obligation that calls him away, or by joking to suggest that the self that is hurrying away is not a serious self, the leavetaker can leave tactfully.

It is interesting to note that informal interplay is frequently terminated, or at least that the termination is frequently confirmed, by the participants moving away from one another. In Dixon an interesting difficulty arose in this connection. When two persons met in a field and engaged for a moment in informal interplay, they would attempt to close out the interplay with the usual signals, such as "good day," and the like. This was satisfactory as long as the two persons happened to be going in different directions. But if their paths diverged only slightly from a single point, separation could only be gradually effected. In such cases, the persons found themselves still close to one another even though official good-byes had been made. Frequently the difficulty seemed to be resolved by one participant either breaking into a run as soon as paths started to diverge, perhaps offering an excuse for doing so, or by one or both participants taking a path that involved more clearcut divergence.[17]

[16] This is what is known as a "cut." One gets the impression that this communication arrangement is less frequently employed today than in previous periods. We avoid interaction by avoiding persons' eyes, but we seem to be inclined to allow the person whose eyes have been avoided to retain the belief that he has been accidentally overlooked.

Thirdly, the withdrawing participant may stat as long as possible in order to show that he is genuinely involved in the interaction. Thus, during billiards, almost all the players followed the practice of not leaving the hall immediately on completion of the game they were playing in but rather waited out a few minutes of the next game, which did not involve them as players. This was a final gesture that the evening's play as such, and not merely their own turn, had involved them. This kind of tactful delicacy was very common in Dixon.

As a final note on termination of interplay, it is to be suggested that a very common strategy for ending an interplay is for all parties to withdraw simultaneously. This seems to be accomplished by an exchange of very minimal cues among the participants so that each becomes areas that the conversation is about to be terminated and makes necessary allowances. No one in such cases is left holding the interplay. On the island, this kind of natural termination frequently occurred, especially where the participants had been together before at occasions of similar interplays and when some feeling of solidarity and mutual approval existed.[18]

In the hotel kitchen natural termination of mealtime interplay became linked with feelings of work control and self-respect on the part of the employees. After a meal, everyone would linger for a time over teat and cigarettes, talking, and allowing a margin of time to elapse, even during the busiest days, between when the meal was technically finished and when it was sociologically finished. The managers, who wanted the employees to return to work as soon as possible, often felt uneasy about waiting for natural termination and tried to hurry up the ending. Mr. Tate was often untactful in these matters and would withdraw psychologically from the interplay and, in a changed tone of voice, tell the employees that there was much work to be done. On many occasions this command was openly overlooked (often, apparently, unconsciously) and the participants would have an extra cup of tea, or bring a chair that had been removed from the table when they had gotten up for something back to the table, on the assumption that persons sitting around a dinner table could not be openly commanded to do work. Mrs. Tate seemed more subtle in her approach and would try to terminate the interplay from within, as it were, saying in the tone of voice being used in the interplay at the time that she guessed she had to get back to work. This often succeeded. Interestingly enough, she felt a little uneasy at using this technique and once admitted to those present, by means of a half-guilty smile, that she had been trying to affect a spontaneous reaction.

[17] A similar problem is sometimes found in our society when two persons, little acquainted, find themselves seated or standing close to one another for a long period of time. After a moment of "small talk" they find themselves with nothing to say and yet not in a position to terminate the interplay. Newspaper reading is often used as a thin excuse to break from the interplay in this situation. Newspaper reading seems to be the minimum activity by which an individual can withdraw from doing nothing and hence being open for interaction.

[18] Bales also seems to have noted this phenomenon. "We note joking and laughter so frequently at the end of meetings that they might almost be taken as a signal that the group has completed what it considered to be a task effort, and is reading for disbandment or a new problem. This last-minute activity completes a cycle of operations involving a successful solution both of the task problems and social-emotional problems confronting the group." Bales, "The Equilibrium Problem in Small Groups," *op. cit.*, p. 143.