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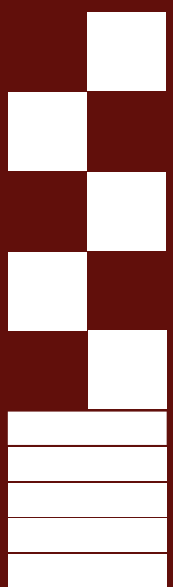
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

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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Part Four: The Concrete Units of Conversational Communication

Part Five: Conduct During Interplay

. . . there exists an immeasurable number of less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction. Taken singly, they may appear negligible. But since in actuality they are inserted into the comprehensive and, as it were, official social formations, they alone produce society as we know it. To confine ourselves to the large social formations resembles the older science of anatomy with its limitation to the major, definitely circumscribed organs such as heart, liver, lungs, and stomach, and with its neglect of the innumerable, popularly unnamed or unknown tissues. Yet without these, the more obvious organs could never constitute a living organism. On the basis of the major social formations—the traditional subject matter of social science—it would be similarly impossible to piece together the real life of society as we encounter it in our experience. Without the interspersed effects of countless minor syntheses, society would break up into a multitude of discontinuous systems. Sociation continuously emerges and ceases and emerges again. Even where its eternal flux and pulsation are not sufficiently strong to form organizations proper, they link individuals together. That people look at one another and are jealous of one another; that they exchange letters or dine together; that irrespective of all tangible interests they strike one another as pleasant or unpleasant; that gratitude for altruistic acts makes for inseparable union; that one asks another man after a certain street, and that people dress and adorn themselves for one another—the whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another and that may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequence (and from which these illustrations are quite casually chosen), all these incessantly tie men together. Here are the interactions among the atoms of society. They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious.

Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. and ed. Kurt B. Wolff (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950), pp. 9–10.

Introduction

doi

This is a report on a study of conversational interaction. It is based on twelve months of field work carried on between December, 1949, and May, 1951, in a small community in Great Britain.[1] The community is located on a small island, one in an isolated group of islands that supports a subsistence rural economy.

The aim of the research was to isolate and record recurrent practices of what is usually called face-to-face interaction. The research was not designed to determine thoroughly or precisely the history of any interaction practice, the frequency and place of its occurrence, the social function which it performed, or even the range of persons among whom it occurred. The project was concerned with a more elementary question, namely, the kinds of types of practices which occurred.

I was especially concerned with those social practices whose formulation and analysis might help to build a systematic framework useful in studying interaction throughout our society. As the study progressed, conversational interaction came to be seen as one species of social order. The social order maintained through conversation seemed to consist of a number of things: the working in together of messages from different participants; the management by each participant of the information about himself conveyed in his messages; the show of agreement maintained by participants; and other things.

I settled down in the community as an American college student interested in gaining firsthand experience in the economics of island farming. Within these limits, I tried to play an unexceptional and acceptable role in community life. My real aim was to be an observant participant, rather than a participating observer.

During the full period of study, an effort was made to guide participation in two directions. First, I tried to participate in as many as possible of the different situations in which members of the community entered into face-to-face interaction with another (e.g., meals, types of work, schooling, shop-loitering, weddings, parties, socials, funerals), and to do this with as many different sets of participants as

[1] I am very grateful to the Department of Social Anthropology and the Committee on Social Science Research of the University of Edinburgh, who financed and sponsored the study, and to Professors W. Lloyd Warner, Donald Horton, and Anselm Strauss of the Univeristy of Chicago, who served as thesis advisors

possible. The aim here was to ensure experience with the full range of variation. Secondly, I participated regularly and for an extended period of time in a few daily and weekly social occasions, each time with the same set of participants. Here the aim was threefold: to minimize for at least some islanders the inhibitory effect of having a stranger present; to ensure observation of the kinds of interaction crises which occur infrequently but which throw light on conduct which occurs regularly; and, finally, to ensure observation of occasions in which factors usually present were for some reason absent, thus providing a makeshift way of experimentally varying one factor while keeping others constant. My attempt to ensure range and depth of participation was facilitated by two fortunate social facts: much of the recreational life in the community is formally organized as an undertaking open to any resident of the island, and there is a strong tradition of neighborly assistance with farm tasks, whereby offers to help are readily accepted and give to the helper a traditional right to eat a day's meals with those he has helped.

During the first few months of the study, it was possible for me to take a running record at large-scale gatherings, noting down verbatim bits of conversation and gestures, and sketching ecological movements, as these events occurred. Later, and especially in the case of small-scale gatherings, recording of this kind would have been considered offensive, improper, and inconsistent with relationships I had established. It then became necessary to record daily observations at the end of each day or at moments of privacy during the day.

While in the field, I tried to record happenings between persons regardless of how uninteresting and picayune these events seemed then to be. The assumption was that all interaction between persons took place in accordance with certain patterns, and hence, with certain exceptions, there was no *prima facie* reason for thinking that one event was a better or worse expression of this patterning than any other event. I want to confess, however, that I found indiscriminate recording very difficult to do, especially in situations where a written note of the event could not be made until some hours after the event had occurred. There was a constant temptation to record only those events which found at the time a neat place in my conceptual organization, either as conforming or radically disconfirming instances. (Thus, as the conceptual organization changed, so also did the kinds of facts that were recorded.) There was also a temptation to concentrate on those vents which struck me as bizarre, dramatic, or entertaining—events likely to mark a reader feel that the data were interesting and meaningful. Mechanical devices such as tape recorders and motion-picture cameras, or rigid techniques

such as time-sampling, would have provided a desirable check on these recording biases. These corrective devices, however, were not practical for social, economic, and technical reasons.

When a spate of interaction is observed in a small isolated community, it is possible for the observer to place the event in a wider context of information concerning the occupation, socio-economic status, friendship and kinship ties, and personality characteristics of the participants. The observer obtains part of this information by direct observation, part by properly timed offhand inquiry, and part of it is thrust upon him by members of the community in order that he may participate without awkwardness in conversational interaction which makes no sense without such information. Therefore it was not necessary to carry on formal interviews, or to employ schedules and questionnaires in a systematically way, in order to collect basic social facts. Nor were these formal techniques employed in order to collect data that might bear directly upon conversational interaction. Members of the community seemed to have few notions of a well-formulated kind concerning social interaction, and I came to feel, by the hints conveyed to me when I first settled down in the community, that residents would not readily accept as a friend and neighbour someone who asked formal questions about interactions or someone who showed an unnatural interest in matters of the kind. In order to observe people off their guard, you must first win their trust. Had the island culture been the kind in which it is possible for outsiders to ask odd sorts of questions, I still could not have employed questionnaires because I did not know about interaction then, either from my own experience or from the literature then available, to ask the right questions. In order to learn what the right questions were, I had to become taken for granted by the community to a degree and in a way that made it unsuitable for me to ask these questions. Interviewing was carried on however, on matters related to the history of the community and to its civic and economic organization, these being matters which the islanders felt were proper subjects for interviews. And interviewing was carried on wherever and whenever questions could be disguised as the ordinary curiosity of an ordinary outsider.

I personally witnessed almost all the behavior and events described in this report. There was, therefore, no need to make use of the sophisticated techniques employed by students who study what people do by carefully analyzing what they say they do. However, I cannot prove that any event recorded in my field notes had, for those who participated in it, the subjective significance and meaning that I claim it had. I cannot even prove that any particular event had the outward objective form that I attribute to it. In order to ensure that a wide range of interactive situations were observed in their natural

contexts, and in order to ensure that some interactions were observed deeply and intimately, as an ordinary participant would observe them, it was necessary to sacrifice other kinds of assurances and controls. Nevertheless, a reasonable number of checks upon observation did seem available.

By being present with some—and only some—of the participants before and after an observed interaction occurred, it was possible to confirm and disconfirm my own interpretations and reactions by asking leading questions and by conversations of the preparatory and post-mortem kind. Confirmation and dis confirmation were also obtained by participants in the kind of furtive communication which occur during an interaction—communication of the kind that ordinarily allows participants to convey secretly an unofficial running comment and judgment on the proceedings in which they are officially involved.

Further, I was allowed to participate informally to the degree to which islanders could rely on me to observe correctly what was occurring in the interaction. Errors on my part were corrected by means of informal sanctions administered by members of the community themselves; correct observation was rewarded by increasing permission to participate informally and by increasing capacity to know what was likely to happen next and to react appropriately. To participate in interaction without causing others to feel embarrassed and ill at ease requires that one exercise, almost unthinkingly, constant tact and care concerning the feelings of others; to exercise this discretion it is necessary to perceive correctly the indications others give of what they are feeling.

Also, the study was concerned with communication; unlike factors such as attitudes, motives, allegiances, etc., there is a sense in which this factor cannot function at all unless the meaning intended by the actor is similar to the meaning that his observers place upon his acts.

Finally, a constant check upon observations was provided by the informational conditions that prevail in a small isolated community. The observations made during a particular interaction could be placed into and checked against a context of information concerning the social reputation of each of the participants, their momentarily inactive social roles, and—since most islanders played out the full circle of their social relationships within the geographical confines of the island—the other kinds of interactions in which they participated. In fact, the availability of this background information, coupled with the relatively wide range of interaction that occurs in a community, provided the two reasons for seeking an isolated community as a convenient place in which to study social interaction.

While these several checks upon observation were available, it was not, of course, claimed that statements made in this study have the kind of reliability that is to be found in counts that are made of durable physical objects that other students can go back and recount. Since this study was concerned with the kinds of things that occurred, and not with more advanced problems such as measures of frequency or intensity, the observational technique employed seemed adequate for the purpose.

The framework developed here attempts to cover a range of data systemically and uniform all. This means that the preliminary terms have been designed to lay the foundation for terms that come later, and therefore that these preliminary terms may have very little interest in their own right. This also means that special terms have had to be given to types of events which are almost but not quite covered by terms existing in the literature already. The effort to be systematic has also caused me to make formal and ponderous explications of notions that form part of common sense understanding of social events. I would like to apologize in advance for these sources of irritation, but I do not see how a current study of interaction can be made without first defining one's terms. However, while there is an inescapable need to define one's terms, it was often not possible, it must be admitted, to do this in a satisfactory way, or to refrain in certain places from falling back on common sense language.

This report attempts to exclude information which might positively identify the community in which the study took place. All names have been changed; sources of historical and statistical information have not been identified. This is not a study *of* a community; it is a study that occurred, *in* a community, of behavior with which no living person ought to be publicly identified.

The study falls into five parts. The first part consists of a brief view of the social life of the community, with special reference to certain recurrent situations for which a relatively extensive interaction record was kept. Here an attempt is made to provide a context for some of the events described later, while at the same time not prejudicing the anonymity of the community. The second part outlines, very tentatively, a conceptual model for viewing interaction as a form of social order. The third part deals with the management of information-about-self. Part four deals with interaction units. The final part deals with conduct of persons while engaged in conversation. The ratio of substantive material to analytical discussion is low in Part Two and increases with each succeeding part.

Except for the introductory chapters (I and II), the beginning of each chapter is phrased in terms of a general discussion of particular communication concepts, and only later in each chapter are field data

introduced. This stylistic device is employed as a way of rendering the data easy for use in the development of a general communication framework. In consequence, a false impression is sometimes given that the field data has been brought in as an afterthought, merely to illustrate concepts earlier arrived at. I should like to make it quite clear that the terms and concepts employed in this study came after and not before the facts. The framework of terms presented in this study was developed in order to identify regularities observed in the communication conduct of the islanders, or in order to make explicit the assumptions which seemed to underlie some of these identifications of regularities.