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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

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Chicago, Illinois

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Contents

The Cradle: Introduction to the mediastudies.press edition x

Introduction 4

Part One: The Context

Chapter I: Dixon 11

Part Two: The Sociological Model

Chapter II: Social Order and Social Interaction 23

Part Three: On Information About One's Self

Chapter III: Linguistic Behavior 31

Chapter IV: Expressive Behavior 35

Chapter V: The Management of Information About Oneself 46

Chapter VI: Indelicate Communication 56

Chapter VII: Sign Situations 60

Part Four: The Concrete Units of Conversational Communication

Chapter VIII: Introduction	66
Chapter IX: Social Occasion	77
Chapter X: Accredited Participation and Interplay	83
Chapter XI: Expression During Interplay	89
Chapter XII: Interchange of Messages	98
Chapter XIII: Polite Interchanges	105
Chapter XIV: The Organization of Attention	114
Chapter XV: Safe Supplies	119
Chapter XVI: On Kinds of Exclusion from Participation	125
Chapter XVII: Dual Participation	132

Part Five: Conduct During Interplay

Chapter XVIII: Introduction: Euphoric and Dysphoric Interplay	139
Chapter XIX: Involvement	141
Chapter XX: Faulty Persons	148
Chapter XXI: Involvement Poise	156

Chapter XXII: On Projected Selves	171
Chapter XXIII: The Management of Projected Selves	190
Interpretations and Conclusions	198
Bibliography	210

Chapter X: Accredited Participation and Interplay

WHEN TWO OR MORE persons are engaged in linguistic communication with one another, in Dixon and apparently elsewhere in Western society, there is a tendency for each participant to extend to himself and to all other participants the like privilege of “accredited” attendance. Briefly, each person not only participates in the interaction but does so, and is allowed to do so, with legitimacy; his manner conveys that he is openly and admittedly involved in the conversation and that his presence in the conversation is a proper and justifiable thing.

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Accredited or legitimated attendance may be thought of as a kind of status. It is perhaps one of the broadest of statuses; persons of extremely discrepant social position can find themselves in a situation where it is fitting to impute it to one another. The status carries the right and the obligation to receive the message at hand, and the status implies the judgment that the participant is worthy and capable of receiving the message. It should be noted that incumbents of the status are obliged to be engaged at that very moment in exercising their status and that the status does not carry over from one period when it is being exercised to another period, as, for example, in the case of occupational statuses. There is no interspersing of times during which the status is exercised with times during which it is latent.

Additional communication statuses may be imposed on participants in an unequal and differential way. For example, only certain participants among those present may be allowed to send linguistic messages as well as receive them. These limitations on one’s rights as sender nevertheless do not alter the fact of an underlying like status of accredited participation which all participants equally enjoy.

While a person may have only the right to receive a linguistic message, and not the right to send one, and still be an accredited participant, it must be made quite clear that mere reception of the message in question does not necessarily imply recognition as a legitimate participant. A person may overhear a conversation without the conversers knowing that this is the case.¹ Further, a person who is known by the participants to be in a position to audit their conver-

¹ This kind of communication arrangement was considered in chap. vi.

sation may be given the status of a "non-person" and treated from the point of view of the conversation as if he were not present and therefore as if certain kinds of consideration need not be given to him."²

Reference has been made, in the chapter on indelicate communication arrangements, to some obvious kinds of reception and participation that are socially unrecognized or unaccredited. The difference between accredited participants and unaccredited participants can be much more subtle than was suggested there. A person can overhear a conversation and know that the accredited participants know he is overhearing the conversation—and yet not be a legitimate participant. This may occur whether or not the conversers make an effort to feign that they are not aware that they are being overheard. Further, the conversers may convey by their manner to the eavesdropper that they realize that he is overhearing them, while at the same time the eavesdropper may convey back to them that eh knows they know he is overhearing them—and still the intruder need not be taken into the conversational circle as an accredited participant. In all of these marginal types of communication, we may have an exchange of action and reaction between accredited participants and the intruder, and yet this by-play is not part of conversational interaction in the strict sense of the term.³

It seems that among the accredited participants of a given spate of linguistic communication, one participant is usually given the role of accredited sender and the remaining participants are accorded the role of accredited recipients. The thoughts of all the participants are usually brought to bear on a particular subject-matter of reference, while at the same time the recipients focus their visual attention on the sender for the duration of his message.⁴ Accredited recipients have the obligation of granting their attention to the sender and the right to expect him to convey a meaningful, acceptable message; the accredited sender has the right of receiving the concerted attention of the other participants and the obligation to fulfill their expectation that a meaningful, acceptable message will be forthcoming.

When a number of persons recognize one another as accredited participants, turning their minds to the same subject-matter and their eyes to the same speaker, a shared definition of the situation apparently comes to prevail. A shared understanding arises as to what judgments are to be openly stated concerning the topic under consideration, and a working acceptance or surface consensus is achieved concerning the complex social valuation that is to be provisionally accorded each participant. A mental set is established and particular attitudes are encouraged. A culture, a climate of opinion, a group atmosphere tend to arise.⁵

² This kind of communication arrangement is considered in chap. xvi.

³ Students of social interaction have sometimes confused the issue by attempting to study a limited type of interactive system, namely conversation, by means of very abstract criteria, e.g., the action of two persons when each knows he is under observation by the other. Abstract criteria such as this are equally satisfied by a whole range of interesting but minor communication arrangements. The crucial criterion of *accredited* participation seems to have been consistently overlooked. The presence of this factor would seem to serve as a means of isolating a natural area for sociological study.

⁴ Cf. R. F. Bales and others, "Channels of Communication in Small Group Interaction," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, XVI (461-468), 461. "The conversation generally proceeded so that one person talked at a time, and all members in the particular group were attending the same conversation. In this sense, these groups might be said to have a 'single focus,' that is, they did not involve a number of conversations proceeding at the same time, as one finds at a cocktail party or in a hotel lobby. The single focus is probably a limiting condition of fundamental importance in the generalizations reported here."

It is possible, presumably, for the thoughts and visual attention of recipients to come together into a focus in order to receive a single message from a speaker, and then for this common orientation to break down completely once the message has been received. Apparently, however, when a number of individuals join one another in a state of mutually accredited participation, there is a tendency for the social-psychological alignment of the participants to remain intact even though a sender's message has been terminated and even though there may have been a shift in the spatial position of the participants and fluctuation (within limits) in the number of accredited participants. As one participant ceases to play the role of sender and falls back into being merely a recipient, another participant takes on the role of sender. The definition of the situation that provided the context for one message is maintained and provides a context for the next message. The focus of visual attention in a sense is also maintained, for while it passes from one speaker to another, it tends to pass to a single speaker. We may refer to the total communication which occurs on the part of accredited participants during the time that they are aligned together in one definition of the situation and one focus of visual attention as an interplay.⁵ The persons who maintain a particular interplay are not thereby a group; they have merely extended to one another a certain kind of temporary communication status.

An interplay may last for a moment, as in the case of strangers who are forced to pass each other on a narrow walk and who glance at each other in order to make sure that difficulties or misunderstandings will not arise. An interplay may last hours, as in the case of organized debates. An interplay may include only two participants (no doubt the most common arrangement); it may include many participants, e.g., a mass meeting. A particular social occasion is usually the scene for more than one interplay at any given moment, but this is not necessarily the case; some social occasions encompass or incorporate only one interplay. Finally, it is often convenient to characterize an interplay by the character of the social occasion in which the interplay occurs.

The statement has been made that participants in an interplay focus their thoughts on the same subject-matter and direct their visual attention to a single speaker, although this attention may pass from one speaker to another. Some qualifications of this statement must be suggested.

1. The focus of attention in an interplay may momentarily pass to objects which can serve in this capacity but in no other relevant one. During informal conversation, for example, the focus of attention may momentarily pass to infants, or animal pets, or even to cultural artificers.

⁵ A statement of this is provided by Gregory Bateson in his discussion of ethos in *Naven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), pp. 119–120.

"When a group of young intellectual English men or women are talking and joking together wittily and with a touch of light cynicism, there is established among them for the time being a definite tone of appropriate behavior. Such specific tones of behavior are in all cases indicative of an ethos. They are expressions of a standardised system of emotional attitudes. In this case the men have temporarily adopted a definite set of sentiments toward the rest of the world, a definite attitude toward reality, and they will joke about subjects which at another time they would treat with seriousness. If one of the men suddenly intrudes a sincere or realist remark it will be received with no enthusiasm—perhaps with a moment's silence and a slight feeling that the sincere person has committed a solecism. On another occasion the same group of persons may adopt a different ethos; they may talk realistically and sincerely. Then if the blunderer makes a flippant joke it will fall flat and feel like a solecism."

⁶ It would be less troublesome to use the term "a conversation" instead of the term "an interplay." However, certain interplays, as for example political speeches, can hardly be called "conversations."

2. A group of persons may play together the role of a single affective sender. Choral singing at a church social provides an example.

3. A participant may attempt, sometimes successfully, to take over the focus of attention before the currently recognized sender is ready to relinquish his role. In addition to the phenomenon of interruption, we also find the phenomenon of "heckling," that is, the practice of capturing the focus of attention for a brief moment in an unrecognized way, so that the recognized sender does not officially terminate his message and is obliged to act as if the focus of attention has not really left him. And we find, especially during large formally-organized occasions, that a knot or cluster of participants may furtively engage in an informal interplay of their own while ostensibly involved in the formally organized one.⁷ In all of these disruptive acts, however, the disruptive sign-impulse is modulated so as to allow in some way for the dominance and effective transmission of the accredited message. In Dixon, for example, the only observed exception to the rule that unaccredited messages ought to be modulated in favor of the accredited message occurred in the case of a sixty-five year old man, an orator of wide repute in the community. In his cottage, within his family circle (and only there), he would interrupt a conversation with a request for the focus of attention and then launch into a long statement, whether or not his request for attention was granted. His family developed a rare tolerance for hearing the full sound of two conversations while being engaged in only one.

The meaning and significance of interruption will, of course, vary. In formally organized interplays explicit and specific sanctions may exist for curbing interruption. In court trials, for example, we have contempt of court actions. Simmel has referred to the practice in some medieval guilds of imposing a fine upon those who interrupted an alderman in his speech.⁸ Miller, in considering what happens when persons come to be on increasingly informal terms, suggests that a record of their speech would show changes in rules regarding interruption:

Such a record of the timing of their conversation will show that at first they are quite polite. Neither interrupts, both wait for the other to finish. As they get to know each other, the rate of interaction increases and interruptions become more frequent. The proportion of the time that each person spends talking usually settles down after several interviews to a relatively constant value.⁹

None the less, if interruption becomes too frequent and both sender and receiver talk at the same time, the interplay usually becomes disorganized.

⁷ This communication arrangement is considered in chap. xvii.

⁸ Simmel, *op. cit.*, fn. p. 349. It has been said that in Nazi Germany persons in a cafeteria or other semi-public place would be fined if they did not stop their conversation when the voice of Hitler came over the radio loudspeaker. This is a case of legal sanctions being imposed on the interruption of mass-impression messages and is no doubt rare.

⁹ George A. Miller, *Language and Communication* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1951), p. 254.

4. It has been suggested that interruptions may occur but that some limitation will exist concerning them. As a fourth qualification to the original definition of interplay, another basic possibility must be mentioned. When one sender terminates his message, it may happen that no other participant immediately volunteers to take on the role of sender and contribute a message. A lull may occur and yet the interplay may not, sociologically speaking, have ended. In general, brief lulls are permissible between messages, and somewhat less brief lulls are permissible between interchanges. A lull of some kind, for example, is often required in order to give recipients a chance to consider the message they have received and prepare a response to it. But if a lull occurs that is too long, relative to the norms of the interplay, interactional disorder and feelings of shame and uneasiness may result.¹⁰

5. During the time that persons are accredited coparticipants, the attention of one or more participants may wander momentarily from the sender. Some of the ways in which this can occur are considered later. Here it must be noted that different kinds of interplay have different standards of tolerance regarding this threat of interaction. Interaction in Dixon tended to confirm the commonsense notion that where an interplay is small, containing two or three persons, rules seem to be strict regarding withdrawal of attention, and where an interplay is large, as in the case of formally organized community socials, greater leeway seems to be accorded to individual participants in momentarily withdrawing attention from the accredited sender. The commonsense explanation for this seems to be valid: if the disaffection of one participant is likely to destroy the interplay (as in the case of two-person interplays or in the case of multi-person formal interplays where the recognized sender withdraws his own attention) then it is strongly tabooed; if it is not likely to destroy the interplay then withdrawal is only mildly disapproved.

6. There are times when the definition of the situation established in an interplay may evolve, develop, or shift rather markedly, so that it becomes reasonable to ask whether or not two different interplays have not been grafted onto each other, the same set of participants and the same focus of attention serving one interplay up to one moment and another interplay afterwards. One often finds, however, that when one participant "changes the topic" completely, and has not done so to save the situation from even graver tensions, then his insensitivity to the prevailing mood and topic is felt to be somewhat improper. Those who do want to change the tone or topic frequently feel obliged to effect a smooth transition by means of messages that meaningfully link the interplay as it was up until then with the interplay as it will become under the direction of the individual initiating the transition.

¹⁰ American broadcasting has contributed the term "dead air" to refer to situations where listeners have, in a sense, given a station their accredited attention and then found that sound suddenly ceases. Apparently stations operate on very slender norms of toleration for dead air. A consideration of the silences during conversation, from the psychological point of view, is given in J. A. M. Meerloo, *Conversation and Communication* (New York: International Universities Press, 1952d), pp. 114–119. The role of silence in the psychoanalytical interview is illuminated by Edmund Berger in his article, "On the Resistance Situation: the Patient Is Silent," *Psychoanalytic Review*, XXV, 170–186.

7. Sometimes interplays of more than two persons may involve differential recipient roles. If a sender has more than one recipient, he may address his message to all of them together as a unit. In public speaking this possibility is frequently an obligation, and speakers work out devices for giving their hearers the impression that they are all equally included. The sender may, on the other hand, address his message to only one or two of his recipients, on the assumption that the unaddressed recipients are none the less recognized as participants. This communication arrangement is typical in small informal interplays. In discussing the question, Bales has used the term "target" to refer to the addressed recipient.¹¹ The addressed recipient is usually given the visual attention of the sender, this act providing both symbol and source of preferential recipient status.¹²

8. Recipients may enjoy many different kinds of clearly defined privilege with respect to assuming the role of sender. In some interplays, the addressed recipient may be accorded more right to take over the role of sender than is accorded to the unaddressed recipients. As previously suggested, in some interplays, certain categories of recognized recipients may not be given the right to become senders. In formally organized meetings, for example, one category of participant may have the right to raise questions during the formal discussion, another category may have the lesser right to raise questions only after the formal discussion has ended, and a third category may have no right in this respect at any time. Similarly, children at the dinner table are sometimes allowed to listen but forbidden to talk;¹³ if not forbidden to talk, they be "helped out" and in this way not permitted to finish a sentence by themselves.¹⁴

Differential sending status is often expressed in terms of restrictions placed upon the kind of message that can be sent. At public meetings, for example, the audience may be restricted to sending the kind of message that can be conveyed by upward or downward modulation of terminal applause. During certain interplays, one category of sender may only be allowed to say, "Yes, sir," or, "No, sir."

9. If a sender addresses his message to some recipients and not to others, his unaddressed recipients may shift the focus of their attention so that it falls, in part, upon the addressed recipients as well as upon the sender. An extreme example of this occurs in the case of activities involving by-play between two performers that are staged in front of an audience. In such cases, the audience may tend to focus its attention on an interplay of staged messages instead of upon a single message.

¹¹ Bales and others, "Channels of Communication in Small Group Interaction," p. 462.

¹² By definition, of course there can be no one with unaddressed status in two-person interplays. Miller (*Language and Communication*, p. 251), in making a similar distinction between addressed and unaddressed recipients, suggests that telephone conversations necessarily provide for no unaddressed recipients. Miller's illustration fails to distinguish between unaddressed recipients each of which the sender knows is present and unaddressed recipients who the sender does not know are present.

¹³ J. H. S. Bossard, "Family Modes of Expression," *Amer. Sociol. Rev.*, X (226-237), 229.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 228.