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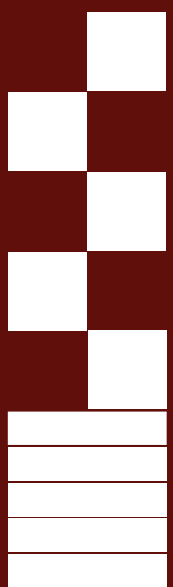
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

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

Erving Goffman

Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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It has been suggested that euphoric interplay occurs when no participant is dislodged, as it were, from a proper degree of unselfconscious immersion in the interplay. This, of course, assumes that the participants are involved in the first place, that is, that they have to a degree cut themselves off from all things external to the interplay—that they have mobilized themselves for the interplay and have been carried away by it.

In stating that participants of any euphoric interplay must become caught up in the interplay, it must be clearly added that the required level of involvement varies from interplay to interplay. Thus, when a housewife in Dixon is going about her daily domestic tasks in the presence of her immediate family, it is possible for her to flit in and out of euphoric interplay while practically all her attention and interest is patently accorded to the pots on the stove or the bannocks in the oven. Were she talking to the gentry or the minister, however, such casual involvement would be considered an affront, and a more focussed orientation to the conversation would be required.

Further, it is apparent that level of proper involvement varies from role to role within a particular interplay. For example, at political meetings in Dixon, it is permissible for women to knit and men to smoke while a speech is being given, but it is not permissible for the speaker to distract himself in these ways.[1] Furthermore, the level of involvement, like the level of tension and "excitement," also varies from one point in the interplay to another, perhaps starting at a rather low pitch, building up to a crescendo, and then gradually falling away in preparation for the termination of the interaction. Thus there is a sense in which every interplay is characterized by an involvement contour. In spite of these variations, however, involvement levels for a given interplay come to be standardized in the sense that anyone who maintains a degree of involvement that departs from the expected is felt to have committed an offense and is likely to disrupt the involvement of others.

[1] It may be noted that the place of knitting as a permissible limitation of involvement has recently undergone rapid change in urban centers of Western society (perhaps because of the war) and is in many situations a matter of doubt. For example, some American college professors permit female students to knit in class, some do not. Smoking seems similarly a matter of doubt in some situations. In Dixon knitting and smoking seem to be permissible at a very wide range of social occasions.

In Dixon it seemed that persons who had had much experience with each other and who knew what to expect of each other could tolerate appreciable deviations from the involvement norm without becoming improperly involved themselves. Improper involvement that was predictable tended to be less disruptive than unanticipated improprieties. On the other hand, interaction with strangers, however brief and well-structured, tended to be dysphoric.

The factor of involvement suggests an interesting contrast between large formally organized recreation, such as a social, and small convivial interplay among a few persons. In the first type, boredom is not rare; in fact it is sometimes so general in the audience that it is necessary to say that the social occasion is at fault and not the participants. On the other hand, an uninvolved recipient can easily be overlooked amidst the many other participants and a feigned expression of interest is not, in Dixon, at least, considered an offense at these large occasions. In the second type—small informal interplay—boredom when present is more visible, more of an offense, and less permissibly concealed by feigning interest. On the other hand, the interest of the recipient is continuously revived by the opportunity he has of himself taking the floor. In Dixon, as apparently in other subcultures of our society, few persons can consistently forego the opportunity that small interplay presents to engineer a favorable image of themselves and to uphold their own convictions; in exercising these opportunities, their flagging interest and involvement is revived.

The requirement that persons be impulsively involved in interplay in which they participate is borne out by a very significant rule, namely that interplay must not be staged or worked out beforehand. In Dixon, when about to tell a joke, or an anecdote, or a piece of news, the speaker would first inquire if the story was known, and, if he had already told the story to some of those present, he would preface the story by excusing himself to them. Similarly, singers who regularly appeared at concerts would attempt to have at least one new song for the occasion, showing that their behavior was not a mechanical repetition of previous activity. The Program Committees of socials were obliged to search for new games for the same reason. Special occasions and special food—events which could not easily be duplicated—also served as an expression of the uniqueness of the situation and would lend euphoria to it. The game of "500" was widely praised, and felt to be superior to whist, because in "500" unique problems were likely to occur.

On the island, there seemed to be two somewhat different ways in which insufficient involvement was expressed. These will be considered separately.

1. One kind of insufficient involvement occurred when participants expressed too little concern for the topic of conversation and what was being said about it. Lack of concern seemed itself to be conveyed in two ways. First, the unconcerned participant might act with coolness, indifference, or pointed interest in events unrelated to the interplay. Secondly, the unconcerned participant could insist on taking in a joking way what others in the interplay had meant to be taken seriously, or insist on taking seriously what others had meant to be taken unseriously. In either case, the disaffected participant would give the impression that the issues of the interplay were not the sorts of things that could embroil him or even touch him. By holding himself apart from the communication in this way, he was able to convey the self-image of someone who did not think it worth while to convey his self-image at that particular time. Unconcern often conveyed an invidious judgment of those participants who apparently did consider the interplay important enough to warrant involvement.

On the island, children were explicitly taught that they must "take" or "show" an interest in any interaction of which they were accredited participants. Perhaps youths became social adults at the point where it was no longer deemed fitting explicitly to enjoin them to show interest when involved in interplay, although their obligation would be indirectly impressed upon them.

In any case, islanders very generally practiced the courtesy of evincing involvement in interactional proceedings, whether or not they were actually involved. The lengths to which this kind of tact can be carried ought perhaps to be suggested.

> During birthday parties, for which up to about fifteen people gather in a crofter's cottage (more could hardly be gotten in), it is customary for organized parlor games to be played. In the main, these games consist of putting persons in embarrassing situations. At one party, at which there were fourteen persons, the mother of the man who was celebrating his birthday hit upon the "pig game." In this game, one person at a time is brought into the room where those "in the know" are assembled and is told he is going to see a pig. A cloth is taken away from what is a mirror and the person sees himself. Since the sponsor of the game could not be discouraged, the game was played, although all those present knew its secret and thought it not a funny game. The assembled group went through the process of playing the game on four or five persons. During the twenty minutes that this required, each successive "butt" of the joke put on an act of surprise at seeing himself in the mirror, and each time the audience put on an act of finding this funny. Everyone present tactfully adhered to the involvement form for games of that type, although no one present was caught up in the game spontaneously.

> During the annual Christmas social games are staged for the very young as well as for adults. In one game, called "Oxford and Cambridge," two lines of players race in relay against each other. A young man of twenty-five in one line found himself running against a six-year-old girl. He pretended to be straining as hard as he could but actually managed only to keep pace with his young competitor. His attempt to be considerate of the girl was conveyed to everyone but at the cost of showing that he was not really involved in the race.
>
> In Dixon, progressive whist is played as the first part of many socials. Tables and benches are placed around the ball in a continuous circle, and up to forty sets of four persons play the game. After each hand the winning men go in one direction and the winning women go in the other, thereby making it possible for many of those present to play with each other. Apparently by playing with many partners, social ties are reaffirmed. At the end of each game individual scores are recorded on individual cards, and at the end of twenty-four games each player adds up his total score. Prizes are given for men's highest score, women' s highest score, and lowest score. During the last few games, interest reaches a relatively high pitch, for at this time players with high or low scores see the possibility of a prize realized or destroyed. At the end and climax of the round of games, when prizes are awarded, some tension is released by spontaneous clapping, and by cheering for the winners. It is very widely known in the community that two elderly women cheat in recording their scores, ensuring either a very high or a very low score. They are known to be only average players, and yet one of them almost always wins a prize at every whist social. Presumably they are interested in acquiring the prizes or in the moment of acclaim that comes with winning one. In any case they "spoil" the game for the others. Some players feel it is useless to get involved in playing well, knowing that simple cheating will obtain a higher score; other players explicitly state that they have mixed feelings about the possibility of winning, because if they win (especially two evenings in a row) others might think it has been by cheating. In any event, many participants are thrown off a little by the realization that two players are acting out ordinary involvement in the play and yet are involved in quite another way. And yet when either of the two known cheaters wins, everyone makes an effort to show enthusiasm and greets the award of a prize to her by proper clapping.

2. Lack of concern in the proceedings has been suggested as one type of insufficient involvement; another type is to be found when a participant shows too much concern with his own relation to the proceedings. The participant may be amply involved in the interplay but i sufficiently forgetful of his presence in it. Two varieties of undue self-concern may be suggested.

First, the actor may give the impression of being too much concerned with the fact that it is he who is sending or receiving the message. He may give the impression that participation is grounds for such anxiety that he withdraws from spontaneous communication

with others, in a kind of startle response, blotting out all concerns with worry about himself. We call this self-consciousness.[2] We detect it in others by a characteristic look in their eyes and by characteristic fumbling behavior on their part. When we detect it in others, the lack of ease which it implies is likely to be transferred to us in the form of embarrassment.[3]

It may be noted that when a crofter and a member of the gentry engaged in interaction, the crofter, especially, was likely to become self-conscious. A meeting on neutral ground—as at an auction—was not so likely to be dysphoric, but a meeting on either's home territory—as in the house of either—almost always resulted in self-consciousness.

There were times in crofting circles when unselfconscious involvement was difficult for persons to achieve. When an individual suddenly found himself in a position where much could apparently be lost or gained by the nature of his behavior, or where he was the center of many persons' attention, as when someone unused to performing performed at a community social, then the individual found it difficult to remain unselfconscious. Women of almost any age found it difficult to sustain an explicit compliment with equanimity and would sometimes turn away on these occasions, cast their heads down modestly, or rush at their "tormentor" with arms flailing, in a joking effort to disrupt the interchange.

It is also interesting to note that persons under the age of about sixteen (and the younger they were, the more this was true) found it difficult to interact with anyone outside of the immediate family without becoming acutely selfconscious. Frequently these persons would feel impelled literally to hide their faces so that their embarrassment could not be seen. However, the more likely a person was to act in this way, the more likely it was, on the whole, for him to be defined as a not-yet-person whose embarrassment was not an important enough thing to embarrass the interaction in which it occurred.

There is a second variety of undue self-concern during interplay: the actor may give the impression of being too much concerned with the effects his message is having upon the recipients or the effects his reception of the message is having upon the sender. Other participants come to this conclusion because they feel the actor is attempting to employ expressive behavior in a calculated way, and presumably no one would do this unless they were more interested than is proper in determining the response of others. We call this affectation. In Cooley's words, the individual "... seems to be unduly preoccupied with what other people think..." of him; affectation, he says, "... exists when the passion to influence others seems to

[2] Self-consciousness, of course, is also found in situations where only undirected communication prevails. While walking, persons in Dixon are supposed to remain relatively unaware of their actions and more or less forget about the presence of their bodies. Under some circumstances, as when persons of high status unexpectedly appear, an individual may become selfconscious; his face may get red and he may feel that his walk has become patently stiff and unnatural.

[3] As a qualification it should perhaps be added that there are some interplays wherein a participant of extremely subordinate status is expected to show some selfconsciousness and causes offense if he is too much at ease.

overbalance the established character and give it an obvious twist or pose."[4]

> Thus there are persons who in the simplest conversation do not seem to forget themselves, and enter frankly and disinterestedly into the subject, but are felt to be always preoccupied with the thought of the impression they are making, imagining praise or depreciation, and usually posing a little to avoid the one or gain the other.[5]

[4] Charles H. Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Scribner's, 1922), p. 196.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

It may be noted that Berganders are restrained in regard to expressive behavior and find it difficult to believe that the volatile expressiveness of some outsiders is, for the outsiders, a natural and spontaneous thing. Instead, Berganders tend to feel that a show of expression must be something introduced for a calculated purpose and that the actor is therefore insincere and something of a poseur. This may partly explain why many Berganders feel that most outsiders are either false or foolish, or both.

* * * * *

The islanders have access to many strategies for ensuring sufficient involvement of participants. Some are suggested below.

One widely employed technique seemed to be to make use of tension developed outside of the actual interplay and to offer a measured resolution of that tension. Since almost everyone usually felt himself to be a little hungry and concerned about this fact, the serving of food, especially "nice" food, was always a way of obtaining the requisite distraction. The use of card-games and other games of chance seemed to operate in a similar way, introducing a state to tension and a resolution of it. The very common practice of members of a family trying out on each other every competitive puzzle or game that was found in magazines and newspapers may also be mentioned in this context. At community socials, games such as "Oxford and Cambridge," musical chairs, "Beetle," guess-the-weight competitions, raffles, etc., seamed to play a similar role. In terms of the dynamics of a social occasion, these devices seem to be a kind of "safe supply." So, too, the alteration of persons' relationship to each other, whether sexual or social, effected by co-participation, served as a source of involvement. In all these cases, involvement in the interaction seemed to be a carry-over or transfer from involvement in events occurring in the midst of the interactants. These events seemed to serve to distract persons away from feelings of either selfconsciousness or unconcern. Alcoholic beverages, brewed in many households on the island and commonly served at convivial social occasions, seemed to play the same role, but perhaps in a more direct way.

A final factor in involvement must be mentioned. It has been suggested that individuals may be viewed as sacred objects: they can be offended or pleased by the expressive significance of events which occur in their presence. Every event that occurs in the presence of a person can have or be given the capacity to confirm or discredit the image he has of himself and the image others have of him.

In Dixon, if the events during an interplay convey to a participant a judgment of him that has not been taken for granted or built up in the interplay, he tends to lose his poise and become embarrassed. This crucial fact will be considered at length in a later chapter. In order to prevent interactional dysphoria, participants attempt to guide their conduct in such a way as not to express an inappropriate judgment of themselves or others. Paradoxically, however, if they succeed in being completely tactful, often the interplay will become stale and flat, and the participants will find less and less cause for involvement in it.

If rules of tact are followed, often boredom sets in. If rules of tact are broken, often embarrassment sets in. Apparently a fundamental source of involvement consists of the slight infraction of tactful rules; either the infraction is committed in an unserious way or care is taken to bend the rule but not break it. This source of involvement will be illustrated in Chapter XXII.