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CHAPTER VII

SIGN SITUATIONS

When persons are in each other's immediate presence, and especially when they are engaged together in conversational interaction, important informational conditions obtain. Each participant is in a position to convey information about himself both linguistically and expressively, especially information having to do with his conception of himself and his conception of the others present. An embarrassingly rich context of events is available to serve as vehicles for signs of this kind; some of these events are simultaneously part of the task organization in which the persons find themselves, while some of these events serve no explicitly recognized task.

When persons are in each other's presence in a given situation, a definition usually prevails as to how each is to be treated. This definition of the situation is made possible by the fact that each participant possesses known determinants or qualifications which select out for others which of the different possible categories of treatment is to be accorded him. A corollary of this definitional process is that all qualifications which a person possesses which act as selective determinants of treatment in other situations but which are officially defined as irrelevant in the current situation must be ignored. The in-

formation which these irrelevant determinants or social characteristics carry may be received, but there is an obligation on the part of the recipient to act as if the information is in no way a determinant or a selector of behavior. This involves, on the part of recipients, suppression of response to information. Further, persons must not bring forth such irrelevant determinants as are not already apparent.

When persons are in each other's immediate presence and are engaged in activity which provides vehicles that are well designed to express actual or possible conceptions that persons have of one another, it may inadvertantly become difficult to suppress the flow of information that is false or that has been defined as irrelevant. For reasons outside the personal aims of any of the participants, and outside their personal control, events may occur which are so aptly expressive of important irrelevant valuations, or important potential but not actual valuations, that participants will feel either that an improper evaluation has been made or that other participants might feel this has occurred. Attention is therefore drawn away from the activity that has been in progress and is brought to bear, at an inappropriate time, on matters of status, and especially on expressive signs by which relative rank is conveyed. At times like these, tension over signs seems to develop and we have what might be called a sign situation. In so far as any particular participant is forced, through the flow of ordinary action in the situation, to act in such a way as to produce a sign vehicle that is accidentally and incidentally well suited to convey irrelevant or

incorrect social information, we may say that he is faced with a sign situation.

Sign situations are constantly occurring; on the occasions when they do not occur, they must constantly be guarded against. There are a fairly large number of strategies of a preventive kind for avoiding the occurrence of these difficulties and there are a fairly large number of strategies of a corrective kind for resolving these difficulties when it has proven impossible to avoid them. These strategies are so widely known and used that we may think of them as being institutionalized.

Perhaps the most obvious technique for handling a sign situation and resolving the dilemma that it introduces is to employ a principle of randomization. By means of this technique, an indulgence or a deprivation can be differentially distributed (in time or by amount) among participants in a way such that none of them is likely to interpret the differential allocation as an expression of differential status. Randomization, then, is a way of basing distribution on a principle that is patently independent of differential status. Like other such strategies, it is a way of ensuring that no offense will be taken where none is meant but where offense is likely. Flipping coins, cutting for high card in order to determine priority of play during a game are common examples of randomization. Serial ordering of persons on a basis of alphabetical priority is another case in point.

In the case of randomization, an extra-social principle is utilized as a means of demonstrating that officially irrelevant

qualifications have not been employed. Another way of solving the same problem is to distribute differential treatment in accordance with a social principle of precedence which involves social qualifications in which no one present is very actively concerned or in which there is very little open to dispute. Thus those who approve of protocol claim that it is a device not for expressing social distinctions but rather for preventing the occurrence of such expressions. By taking note of every event which might be taken by some as an expression of relative status or relative approval, and establishing an order for these events based on distinctions in rank established beforehand, assurance can be given that nothing not already taken for granted will be expressed. Another important example derives from service relations, where the principle of "first come, first served" is commonly employed. Thus customers are induced to interpret the order in which they are served as expressive of nothing more significant than their order of arrival. In the same way, the principle of seniority is often invoked in formal organizations as a tactful means of distributing differential rewards. (These practices have the important incidental function of stressing the reality and importance of the situation at hand as opposed to the reality of the participants' irrelevant statuses.)

In this connection it should be noted that we have statuses of an almost ceremonial kind, such as the very old, the very sick, the young, and the "weaker sex;" and that in certain contexts the incumbents of these statuses can be given preferences which are of very little value in themselves but which

might otherwise be allocated in an offending way. The potentially troublesome privileges that are neutralized in this way convey respect that is more akin to light pity than to envy. It should be added that there are occasions when these statuses provide a disturbing issue and at these times they cannot, of course, play a merely ceremonial role. A woman who is an ardent feminist may be offended if her sexual status is not allowed to remain irrelevant as a determinant of treatment in certain kinds of situations, even though she may appreciate that little significance is attached to the differential treatment she is accorded. So also, a man who is not quite old may be offended if he is given the empty privileges sometimes accorded to the aged.

A very general way of dealing with a sign situation is that of apology or exorcism, a verbal technique for convincing a potentially offended person that no offense is meant or an offended person that the offense was not intentional. Apologies frequently take the form of a well-patterned interchange between offender and recipient of the offense. In this way an act can sometimes be cleared of the expressive function that has been or might be imputed to it.

By merely entering a conversation or place where conversation may occur, an individual performs an act that is well designed to serve as a vehicle for expressing interest, involvement, or approval. Similarly, by leaving a place where communication is occurring, the individual performs an act that could easily be taken as expressive of disinvolvement, lack of interest, and disapproval. However, on many occasions an individual may

desire to enter or leave the communication presence of others for instrumental reasons unrelated to the expressive use to which these acts lend themselves, or for social reasons which he desires to conceal. The individual is thus faced with a sign situation. If the technical motive for the act is sufficiently clear and urgent, then this fact alone usually seems enough to resolve the tension, giving the individual license to more or less neglect the potential expressiveness of his act. Everyone is willing to make allowances for exigencies; the chief problem is to convince others that one's behavior has been suddenly determined by one.[1]

A related strategy is based on the use of "natural breaks" in communication. Persons frequently postpone their arrival or departure until such time as its potential expressive value is minimal.

The social life of Dixon is full of ways in which persons may be given offense unintentionally and of ways in which the likelihood of doing this can be avoided or neutralized. In the shops, customers, regardless of sex, age, kin or class status, are served in order of priority of presence in the shop; a shopper who breaks this order must broadcast a very good reason for doing so. Those who organize the annual concerts make sure that all three communities are represented by performers so that no one

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[1]According to book-etiquette, the expressive implications of refusing an invitation must be counteracted, at least formally, by reference to a real or fictive prior engagement or obligation of some kind. An invitation, once accepted, may be broken tactfully only on grounds of sudden business, ill-health, or death of a relative. Similarly, on leaving a party early, some "legitimate" excuse must be given.

community will take offense. At billiards, right of play is determined by the number of games one has waited, and first play at the start of any particular game is determined by flipping a coin or guessing which hand contains which ball. There seem, in fact, to be few situations where the actor does not have to ask himself the questions: am I being tactful; will I be thought unfair. The larger the number of events that can serve as signs, the more difficult the problem. Perhaps it is in face-to-face communication that the greatest number of events occur which might possibly be taken as being expressive. Hence face-to-face communication can be seen as a scene of diplomatic labor, where participants must expend a great deal of effort ensuring that others do not receive a "wrong" impression.

It was suggested earlier that conversational interaction may be viewed as an informational game, the goal of the game being to learn as much as possible about the other while at the same time controlling as much as possible the information about oneself that the other obtains. The rules of the game establish permissible times, places, and amounts of deceit and feigning, and provide negative sanctions for players who are caught breaking the rules. It is a game of informational management.

This view must be broadened, however. The instrumental setting in which the actor enters into conversational interaction with others is constantly providing, or threatening to provide, situations and events that can easily be accepted by others as expressions of the actors' sentiments and conceptions. In many cases, these impressions do more than "give the actor away."

These impressions often make the actor responsible for conceptions which are offensive to recipients or unfavorable to the actor, and often these impressions are either not justified or have to do with sentiments which the actor possesses but which he had definitely been trying to suppress. For the actor, others may come to be seen as sacred objects. The social attributes of recipients must be constantly honored; where these attributes have been dishonored, propitiation must follow. The actor must be on his guard almost all the time and carefully poised in his action. He must conduct himself with great ritual care, threading his way through one situation, avoiding another, counteracting a third, lest he unintentionally and unwittingly convey a judgment of those present that is offensive to them. Even more than being a game of informational management, conversational interaction is a problem in ritual management.

The ritual model for social interaction has been poorly treated in the literature, perhaps because of the stress given by G. H. Mead and by Weber to the fact that a social relationship, and hence social interaction, was a product of <u>two</u> persons taking <u>each other's</u> actions into consideration in pursuing their own action. This stress seems to have given an instrumental flavor to our thinking about the kinds of consideration we show in regard to others: the implication is that we <u>take into consideration</u> the actions of others (the better to achieve our personal ends, whatever these may be) and not so much that we <u>give consideration to</u> other persons. By "consideration" we have tended to mean calculation, not considerateness.

A case may be made for the view that the best model for an object to which we give consideration is not a person at all, but a sacred idol, image, or god.[1] It is to such sacred objects that we show in extreme what we show to persons. We feel that these objects possess some sacred value, whether positive and purifying, or negative and polluting, and we feel disposed to perform rites before these objects. These rites we perform as frequently and compulsively as the sacred value of the object is great. These worshipful acts express our adoration, or fear, or hate, and serve for the idol as periodic assurances that we are keeping faith and deserve to be in its favor. When in the idol's immediate presence we act with ritual care, appreciating that pious actions may favorably dispose the idol toward us and that impious actions may anger the idol and cause it to perform angry actions against us. Persons, unless they are of high office, do not have as much sacred power or mana as do idols, and hence need not be treated with as much ceremony. An idol is to a person as a rite is to etiquette.

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[1]This general view I base on Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, trans. J. W. Swain (New York: Macmillan, 1926), pp. 240-272.