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Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman

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COMMUNICATION CONDUCT
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

Erving Goffman

Chicago, Illinois

December, 1953

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Chapter XVIII: Introduction: Euphoric and Dysphoric Interplay

WHEN PERSONS ARE IN each other's presence, it is possible that no one will be made to feel ill at ease, out of countenance, nonplussed, self-conscious, embarrassed, or out of place because of the sheer presence of the others or because of the actions of the others. No one will have the feeling that there is a false note in the situation. When these conditions are present, we may say that the interaction is euphoric. To the degree that those present have been made to feel ill at ease, we may say that the interaction is dysphoric.¹ In this study we are concerned with euphoric and dysphoric interaction only in cases where those present to each other are *also* involved in accredited directed communication with one another, i.e., in interplay. (It is to be clearly understood that many interesting false notes arise among persons who are engaged only in undirected communication with each other.)

In Dixon, the specific requirements for euphoric interplay seem to be very subtle and complex. So delicate a balance seems to be required of factors potentially opposed to each other that it is a wonder any interplay at all is completely euphoric.²

When persons engage in interplay (as in any other activity) there is a tendency for them to become unselfconsciously, spontaneously, and unthinkingly immersed or involved in the proceedings. During any particular interplay, norms seem to prevail which indicate the degree to which participants ought to immerse themselves or forget themselves in the interaction.³ It would seem that in Dixon the most general requirement of euphoric interaction is that no participant act in such a way as to disturb or disrupt a proper degree of involvement on the part of the other participants. This generalization does not answer the question of what makes for euphoric and dysphoric interaction, but only moves the question one step back, for we must go on to ask what sorts of behavior on the part of one participant throw the other participants off balance and make it difficult for them to involve themselves spontaneously in the interplay in the way required of them.

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¹ The terms *euphoria* and *dysphoria* have been employed by students of preliterate societies to refer to social systems that are functioning well or functioning badly.

² In contrast, observation suggests that euphoric interaction is quite common in situations where persons present to one another are not engaged in interplay nor feel obliged to be. In Dixon it seemed easy for persons to fulfill unselfconsciously expectations regarding proper clothing, proper modulation of voice and gestures, and other requirements of public seemliness and decorum.

³ It has become common to consider interpersonal communication as that which occurs when two persons each take the probable response of the other into consideration. This view seems to be implied in G. H. Mead and to have been carefully elaborated into a model of feints and strategies and infinite tactical maneuvers by von Neumann. It overlooks the crucial fact that a sender

Until now in this study, interplay has been considered from a rather mechanical point of view. It has been suggested that orderly interplay seems, in Dixon, to have certain functional characteristics: warning must be given as to when the interplay is to start, when it is to end, and who is to be officially included in it; during the interplay, a supply of messages must be assured, interruption must be controlled and regulated, and a transition from one sender to another must be effected; a center of focus must be maintained. When these arrangements did not prevail, dysphoria tended to occur. However, these requirements seemed to be necessary but not sufficient grounds for euphoric interaction. Interplay was often conducted in a perfectly orderly way and was nevertheless dysphoric.

It is sometimes felt that euphoric interplay is interaction in which participants are made to feel happy or pleased, and that dysphoric interplay is interaction in which participants are made to feel deprived. This is by no means always the case. Apparently deprivations can be conveyed to participants in a way which leaves them saddened but does not disrupt the euphoria of the interaction; indulgences can be conveyed in a way which leaves participants happy but embarrassed. Gaiety and lightheartedness can prevail in an awkward situation, and anger and hostility can prevail in euphoric conversation.

In the chapters that follow, no assumption is made that a complete, or satisfactory, or systematic analysis of euphoria and dysphoria in interplay has been given. The problem will be approached from different points of view, some of which overlap and some of which have very little relation to each other. As many different approaches will be attempted as the data seem to call for.

is committed to the expressive component of his communication, this tending to be, in a sense, more of an impulsive response to the situation than a calculated and tactical adjustment to it. By expressing himself spontaneously, the sender becomes intimately a part of the situation, instead of merely a rational manipulator of it. In a manner of speaking, the character of the sender becomes lodged in and infused into his communicative acts, giving these acts a weight and a reality in their own right. To the extent that actors can control their behavior in accordance with tactical utility, communication can conveniently be seen as a type of abstract rational game—a game that can be played at a distance, in any convenient context, at any convenient time, and by means of any convenient set of symbols for denoting individual moves. To the extent that actors cannot prevent themselves from conveying their feelings on a matter (or do not attempt to do so), interpersonal communication can conveniently be seen as part of a unique concrete situation, each message inseparably part of the context in which it occurs. It would seem that the unthinking impulsive aspect of interaction is not a residual category that can be appended as a qualification to a rational model of communication; the spontaneous unthinking aspect of interaction is a crucial element of interaction.