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BY

ERVING GOFFMAN

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE MANAGEMENT OF PROJECTED SELVES

During interplay, events may occur which make it difficult for participants to accept in an unthinking way the self projected by someone among them, or to continue to accept a projected self which they had initially accepted in this way. On such occasions dysphoria is likely to occur. The conscious realization that a projected self has not been or is no longer spontaneously accepted--whether this realization comes to the person whose projected self is not accepted or to the others--is likely to heighten the dysphoria.

During interplay in Dixon, individuals exercise tact or social strategies in order to maintain interactional euphoria. Some of these strategies are preventive, serving to avoid threats to the interplay; some are corrective, serving to compensate for dangers that have not been successfully avoided. These strategies may be employed by the individual causing the disturbance (if, in fact, it is felt that some one person in particular is at fault) or by individuals for whom such a disturbance is caused. When these strategies are successfully employed, social harmony in the interactional order is maintained or restored. Of course, a person who acts in such a way as to contribute to the euphoria in an interplay may act from many different motives

and intentions. Some typical strategies are reviewed here, illustrations being provided for a few of them.

Discretion

A gaffe has been defined as any act which precipitously discredits a projected self that has been accepted in an interplay. Of the many kinds of gaffes, two varieties seemed to stand out clearly.

First, there were what are sometimes called "boners," where the person responsible for the gaffe is also the person whose projected self is discredited. Boners themselves vary in the degree to which the self that is discredited is a self of which those who had initially accepted it were suspicious and doubtful. Islanders employed two preventive strategies regarding boners: they made an effort to express modesty wherever possible, and they took care not to appear in situations where a boner was likely, as during an appearance on the community hall stage, unless they felt sufficiently poised to do so. And as described in the previous chapter, they employed the corrective strategy of defining in an unserious way a situation in which they had made a boner.

Secondly, there were what are sometimes called "bricks," where the person responsible for the gaffe is not the person whose projected self is discredited. Strategies for preventing the occurrence of bricks seemed to be an aspect of tact which islanders were conscious of as tact and about which they had explicit expectations. Islanders felt that adults ought to have

their wits sufficiently about them not to create what they called "faux pas."

During interplay in Dixon, every participant seemed to project a self into interaction which the mention of some facts of his past life would embarrass. These facts were usually not major ones, as may be found in urban situations where social practices such as "passing" are possible, nor were they sufficiently important so that the mere knowing of them by the participants would discredit the person to whom they applied. But they were sufficiently important so that if they were raised at an inopportune time, they would cause the individual (and sometimes others) to lose his poise and feel ill at ease, bringing to the interplay some constraint and dissonance. A very general form of tact practised on the island was the avoidance of mention of anything which would bring to any participant's attention facts about himself which he found at the moment embarrassing. Islanders have an intimate knowledge of each other's "sore points" and are thus in a position to avoid them. The betrothal of a man and woman would not be mentioned before the rejected suitor. Questions of paternity would not be raised in the presence of a bastard. Strong views on politics or religion would not be voiced until the politics and religion of all participants had been tactfully established.

Discretion was also exercised in avoiding interplay with persons under circumstances which might make it difficult for them to sustain the self they would be likely to project.[1] Thus,

[1]See the reference to "avoidance relationships" in chapter xx.

an old crofter who had no land and who made no attempt to keep his cottage clean was provided with hot meals by the neighbors around him, the meals being brought to his cottage and handed to him at the door. A woman who had lived across the road from him for more than ten years suggested that she always got "one of the bairns" to deliver the meal because she felt the old man would be embarrassed if she came and saw how the inside of his house looked.[1]

In the case of strangers from off the island, whose past life could not be thoroughly known, care had to be taken to stay off topics that while not known to be embarrassing could be embarrassing. Thus, the islanders were sufficiently tactful towards strangers not to inquire into matters such as religion but to stay off the topic and wait for information to be volunteered, thereby illustrating Simmel's dictum that discretion ". . . consists by no means only in the respect for the secret of the other, for his specific will to conceal this or that from us, but in staying away from the knowledge of all that the other does not expressly reveal to us."[2] Persons on the island exercised the kind of tact that is calculated to make it easier for others not to be tactless. Newcomers to the island are warned

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[1]On the occasion when a section of the community was being canvassed for contributions to the postman's retirement gift, the same woman argued that the canvasser ought to collect some money from the old man because while he might not be able to afford it as well as some of the others (he was on relief) he would feel hurt if he thought he had been omitted.

[2]Simmel, op. cit., pp. 320-321. A functional implication of this kind of tact is, of course, that the strangers voluntarily provide information to others of the kind they will require in handling them.

before it is too late as to what not to talk about before whom, this warning coming either from the sensitive person himself or from an interested third party. For example, Mr. Alexander's wife (not on the island) was a Catholic. Catholicism could be discussed in his presence but not in the same way it was discussed in his absence. The gentry took care to warn their visiting friends of this fact so as to "avoid embarrassment."

Hedging

During interplay in Dixon, many individuals frequently employ the preventive strategy of never committing themselves, fully and irrevocably, upon an issue--whether the issue directly reflects upon the self-image of the participants or does so only indirectly. Participants tended to take care to involve themselves and commit themselves judiciously, not allowing themselves to become clearly identified in the eyes of the others with a self-image which unanticipated communications might contradict.[1]

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[1]During interplay it was frequently assumed that all those present were in agreement with each other on fundamental impersonal issues and that, by implication, every participant was the sort of person who would hold the accepted view on a given issue. The occurrence of open disagreement on particular issues led participants to feel that they had unjustifiably taken a sympathetic view of each other. The sudden occurrence of disagreement obliged talkers to "back down" in the interests of maintaining a show of harmony, requiring a speaker to fumble with the tone of assurance and authority that had been in his voice. Expressed disagreement, then, was a threat to the selves that had been projected into the situation. An important exception occurs in interplays that are specifically designed to provide an opportunity for argumentation of a disinterested, dispassionate kind. In such a context, disagreement over impersonal issues need not disturb the working acceptance, providing the participants take their disparate stands in accordance with the rules for coolheadedness and disinterest.

No matter how sure they are of the propriety of their acts, they hold themselves back a little; they hedge a little; they attempt to maintain a margin of safety. Thus, if an unanticipated communication occurs which is inconsistent with the positions that have been taken, it is still possible for participants to act as if the positions in question were not fully or unreservedly taken. Communicated valuations may thus come to grief without bringing a similar fate to the person who conveyed them; salvage is possible.

One of the most interesting variants of the strategy of hedging is found in what might be thought of as exploratory communication, or the process of feeling a person out. The sender takes a position on a particular matter in an ambiguous or mild way. If the recipient responds with no encouragement, the sender is in a position to claim that the valuation was not important to him, or that it was not meant in the way the recipient took it. If the recipient responds with encouragement, then the sender is in a position safely to add a little more weight and clarity to his initial valuation. In this way the sender can go through a sequence of steps, committing himself a little more with each step but always remaining within a safe distance of what is an acceptable position. Thus, with respect to any single continum of expressed valuation, no matter which one of the two participants is first to call a halt, the other is left with a manageable or defensible position. Exploratory communication occurs frequently in courting situations and in the "placing" interplay by which two newly acquainted persons learn about

each other's statuses without either person conveying (at any one stage in the process) a standard of judgment that is embarrassingly damaging to the other or embarrassingly revelatory of himself.

A common form of exploratory communication occurred in Dixon with respect to requests for favors and the giving of orders. If a favor was asked of someone, and the person asked felt obliged to refuse, then the asker was put in the position of having been presumptuous, assuming more friendliness or good will than actually existed. In order to avoid the appearance of such discrepancies, persons asked for a favor usually acceded or, if not, provided a very understandable excuse for refusing. Persons who wanted to ask a favor knew this to be the case and did not want to put others in the position of feeling forced to accede in order to maintain euphoria.[1] Hence favors were often asked in a roundabout way, so that they could be refused before the asker had committed himself to a self of someone asking a favor. Thus if someone was to be asked to go to the shop to make a purchase, the asker would first inquire of the other if he were going down the road. The answer, "No, not just now," would end the interchange without either person having placed himself in an embarrassing situation. If the answer was, "Yes, I am," then the request to bring something back from the shop could be made with relative safety. So, too, when one person was acting as guest-worker, his host would usually say, "You can do this next if you

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[1]See references to the "After you, Alphonse," interchange, chapter xxi.

want," instead of commanding him. Similarly, if the managers of the hotel wished to visit relatives for a night they would ask a member of the staff who was entitled to have that time off if he was doing anything that night.

In Dixon, and perhaps throughout Britain, many persons are interested in obtaining a little more than their legal share of rationed foods and materials, and many supply sources have something extra to distribute. A code has apparently developed whereby the customer can convey the fact that more than the ration would be desired without presenting a self that might have to be refused and, by implication, found illegal, or greedy, or immoral. The server says, "How much would you like?", a phrase which can mean, "How much of your ration do you want?" or "If there were no rations to think of, how much would you want?" Customers frequently reply in a light-hearted way. "As much as I can get," thus making a joke of the situation and at the same time conveying something that can mean, "As much as I can legally get on my ration book" as well as what it usually means. They frequently add a sly wink to the nearest customer as guarantee that they are not being "serious." The server is then in a position to offer the customer an extra amount, or to say, "We only have such and such," or "You can have half a pound on each book" (this being the legal amount). In either case the customer is in a position to act as if he has not projected demands of an inappropriate kind. Further, if the customer feels righteous and says, "Only what I am allowed," the server is in a position to act as if he, too, is following the legal code.

Politeness

In an early part of this study, it was suggested that individuals may be viewed as sacred objects; they can be offended or pleased by events which have an expressive significance even though not an instrumental one, and signs of approval and disapproval can be found or sought in every event that occurs in their presence.

In entering interplay in Dixon, each participant seemed to estimate roughly the degree to which he would be approved and the basis of the approval and lower his defenses, as it were, to a corresponding degree. Thus, if one participant conveyed sharp approval or disapproval of another participant, the judged participant was likely to become ill at ease and become more self-consciously concerned with himself than is thought proper. While islanders recognize moral and expediential reasons for not being too explicit in their approval and disapproval of others present, they also seemed to be motivated by a desire to prevent the embarrassment--the interactional dysphoria--that might be a consequence of such expressed judgments. Thus, an image of what might and might not give offense to another is a principal guide for one's conduct in interplay.

Unseriousness

Perhaps the most frequently employed social strategy in Dixon, both as a preventive and a corrective measure, was the introduction of an unserious definition of the situation. If an individual found that he had been implicitly or explicitly as-

signed a role that he was not sure he could properly carry through, he would joke about his incapacity so that if he did fail those present would feel that the self that had been discredited was not the individual's basic or real self. If he committed a gaffe, or if another participant committed one that was not too serious, he could introduce an unserious definition of the situation in an effort to restore harmony. If a sender conveyed something that suddenly appeared to give offense or that might possibly give offense, he could act as if it were only meant in jest.[1] If a communication was received that was unacceptable to him, he could avoid open disagreement by replying with unserious agreement or unserious disagreement. In all of these cases, the person who used the strategy could only be accused of a breach in taste, that is, he could only be accused of being unserious at the wrong time or about the wrong thing. The ability to employ this strategy so as not to allow a potentially discreditable self to be given temporary credit was part of what seemed to be implied in the phrase "to have a sense of humor."

When, for example, a person asked for a second helping of food, he often did so in a tone that approximated baby-speech, presumably showing that the self that was asking for food was not the actor's real self and could be thought greedy without disturbing the situation. In the same way, when men got a little drunk and exercised extra prerogatives in their behavior, they

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[1]Doyle, op. cit., p. 79, gives an example: "A slave, in case of a breach of etiquette or duty, could laugh, as a sign that no offense had been intended."

would make sure to slur their voices, even though this may not have been inevitable, showing that the improperly conducted self was not a real one.

Sangfroid

It has been suggested that improper involvement is a contagious thing, that when one participant feels ill at ease a conscious realization by others that this is the case is likely to disturb their involvement also. The capacity to conceal signs of interactional discomfort is sometimes called "sangfroid." Concealment of this kind breaks the vicious-circle effect of embarrassment and constitutes a kind of tact. Two examples may be given.

During a community concert in Dixon about twelve six- to eight-year-old children are singing in chorus; their teacher is accompanying them on the piano, which is on the stage. The electric lights, which have just replaced gas-pressure lamps, fail for a moment. The audience becomes momentarily disoriented and there is an immediate, though quite light, murmur throughout the audience. The pianist plays a little louder and the school children go on singing, exactly as if nothing had happened. In a moment the audience is again silent and the lights go on.

During a political meeting at which a county candidate was speaking, Dr. and Mrs. Wren arrived late. They entered a situation in which all members of the audience were formally defined as equal, a definition borne out by the fact that the island's business family, the Allens, sat on the same kind of benches and with no better point of vantage than the assembled audience of crofters enjoyed, and that after the speech crofters spoke up and asked questions with much the same confidence as shown by the gentry in asking questions. Close to the speaker there were two chairs, and as the Wrens entered a crofter sitting near the end of a bench near the chairs got up and pointed to the chairs, inviting the Wrens to take a place of preference. This action forced everyone to remember that preferential participation rights were once accorded to the gentry and that agreement no longer existed as to proper conduct in these matters. Dr. Wren laughed lightly and quickly answered the invitation by saying that he was so big no one would be able to see through him

so he should best sit on the bench. The audience relaxed. After the meeting, he admitted to his wife and the writer that the offer had been a damn-fool thing and that privileges "like that would never do."

Presumably this social strategy differs from some other kinds of tact in that a mere desire to exert it is not in itself sufficient; trained capacity is required.[1] Islanders seemed to differ widely in their capacity to remain cool under social fire.

Feigned Indifference

Individuals base their projected selves upon certain positively valued attributes. It has been suggested that contingencies may occur which demonstrate that a particular individual has radically more or radically less of a given attribute than his activity up to then implied. The practice of feigning indifference is a preventive strategy for overcoming this danger. It was much used in Dixon. By feigning indifference to an attribute, the individual could project and establish a self-image in which the attribute played no part. Once this image was overtly accepted by others, then failure (or too much success) with respect to the particular attribute ceased to be an uncontrolled source of embarrassment; the working acceptance based on the projected self was not disrupted because the projected self had been originally defined in such a way as to exclude the

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[1] Romantic literature and etiquette books regularly attribute this capacity to the best classes. To the writer's knowledge, no one has actually studied the minute-to-minute behavior of a social elite to discover whether in fact the members do practise this (and other) tactful strategies more than do members of other classes.

attribute that was later brought into question.[1]

Non-Observance

In Dixon, another strategy used to cope with embarrassing situations is for all concerned to act as if the disruptive, discrediting event had not in fact occurred. Individuals acted as if they had not seen or heard the discrediting event. It is interesting to note that a conflict sometimes arose, as in the case of stomach growls, burps, or the dropping of a piece of food, as to which strategy to employ: whether to act as if the event had not occurred or to recognize that it had occurred and that it was to be made a joke of. Frequently the tension and dysphoria on such occasions was created not by the offending act itself but rather by the state of suspension the participants found themselves in, waiting for the offender to define

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[1] From the point of view of the others, the individual who feigns indifference acts like a person who has what he wants and doesn't want what he hasn't got. (When this maneuver begins to convince the very person who performs it, we have, presumably, a variant of a major structural element in social life, namely, pride.) The practice of feigning indifference serves as a means of self defense for the person who employs it, but it serves many different important functions for the interplay in which it is performed. For example, it seems that informal interplay could not smoothly perform certain of its social functions unless unwanted participants could be relied upon to withdraw voluntarily from the interplay (or voluntarily abstain from entering) on the basis of slight hints conveyed to them by other participants. Slight hints do not disrupt the most intimately defined working acceptance; all the participants can overtly maintain a spirit of friendliness and affability. And yet within such a context, a participant who is willing to take a hint can be led voluntarily to accept extreme deprivations. From the point of view of the interplay, a participant's sensitivity to hints means that he is tractable and manageable; from the point of view of the participant himself, it means an opportunity to protect himself by feigning indifference.

which strategy he, and hence they, would have to take.

Just as non-observance served as a means of maintaining a self another had already projected, so a kind of non-observance occurred in response to a person who acted with patent pretensions. If the projected self was too serious for others to laughingly discredit, as by employing the phrase "come off it," then to save the situation participants were often required to act as if they in fact did not sense a discrepancy between the self projected and the self they knew or felt to exist. For example, when a visitor to the island or a small child showed undue enthusiasm, projecting a self that put too much stock in what was for the adult islander a small matter, the offender would be answered with a show of feigned enthusiastic interest. Similarly, when a husband told anecdotes to his friends, projecting an image of someone making a fresh and spontaneous contribution to the interplay, his wife and others present who had already heard the same person tell the same story with the same show of spontaneous involvement, would tactfully act as if it were all new to them and do an appropriate "take" when the climax of the tale was reached.[1]

Brief reference may be made to three other strategies employed in Dixon. When a participant inadvertantly acted in such a way as to disrupt or discredit his projected self, he sometimes attempted to ease the situation by providing a rationalization for his act. A rationalization may be defined as a causal explanation offered by an offender in order to account

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[1]Other illustrations are given in chapter xix.

for his offense in a way which provides an unapparent but acceptable reason for it. An alternative sometimes employed was for the offender to become aggressively self-righteous and attempt to establish the fact that his gaffe really represented a proper way of behaving and that the others were themselves acting improperly if they felt that the self they had accepted for the participant was inconsistent with the self implied in the gaffe. Finally, the offender sometimes employed the alternative of becoming over-apologetic. He would commit himself fully to an act of exorcism and apology, attempting to persuade the others present that he was at one with them in their attitude to the infraction and that one part of him, at least, was not the sort of person who would tolerate the offense in question.