

1953

Communication Conduct in an Island Community

Erving Goffman

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COMMUNICATION CONDUCT
IN AN ISLAND COMMUNITY

A MEDIASTUDIES.PRESS PUBLIC DOMAIN EDITION

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mediastudies.press | 414 W. Broad St., Bethlehem, PA 18018, USA

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COVER DESIGN: Mark McGillivray | Copy-editing & proofing: Emily Alexander

CREDIT FOR SCAN: Internet Archive, 2015 upload

CREDIT FOR LATEX TEMPLATE: Book design inspired by Edward Tufte, by The Tufte-LaTeX Developers

ISBN 978-1-951399-09-2 (print) | ISBN 978-1-951399-10-8 (pdf)

ISBN 978-1-951399-08-5 (epub) | ISBN 978-1-951399-07-8 (pdf)

DOI 10.32376/3f8575cb.baaa5oaf

Edition 1 published in December 2022

The University of Chicago

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 IX: Social Occasion

IN DIXON, AS, APPARENTLY, elsewhere in English-speaking society, the term “social occasion” is often given to events such as a whist-social, a picnic, a public political meeting, etc. When we examine events of this kind, we can isolate a set of common characteristics:

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1. Regulations usually exist as to who may and may not participate, and all those participating do so in capacities defined as relevant.
2. The event is felt to have a beginning and an end (even though in some cases it may not be possible to define precisely the moment of beginning or ending) and is felt to be in continuous existence between these points, even though lulls and intermissions may occur. Further, between the beginning and the end of an occasion there is what might be called an involvement contour, a line tracing the gradual initial involvement of the participants in the occasion, the peaks and low points of the involvement of the participants during the occasion, and the path by which the participants come finally to reemerge from their psychological commitment to the activity of the occasion and leave the interaction.
3. Participants recognize that the event involves a “main” or “chief” activity and that this activity takes place in a very small number of bounded regions which are usually connected with one another. Main regions are recognized. In addition, recognition is given to a number of other regions, usually smaller than the main ones, where activity functionally related to the main activity but different from and subordinate to it takes place. Thus, at a whist-social in Dixon, whist is defined as the main activity and the large room in the community hall is defined as the main bounded region; the kitchen, the cloak rooms, and the entrance hallway are recognized as places where related but secondary activity occurs. These regions, whether main or subordinate, are of course the scene of other kinds of social occasions at other times.
4. One or more participants are usually defined as responsible for getting the occasion under way, guiding the main activity, and terminating the event.

Events which may be classified as social occasions themselves vary in certain ways. Some of these dimensions of variations will be suggested here.

1. Social occasions vary according to the degree to which participants recognize that the goal or object of the occasion is realized within the occasion itself.¹ Thus, in Dixon, a political rally may be attended in order to obtain the opinion of the speaker; attendance in such cases is an admitted means to an end, and the end is something that falls outside the meeting itself. A party, on the other hand, is not attended as a means to some end lying outside the party itself; to say that participants go for recreation seems only an attempt to put into an instrumental mode of thinking what really does not belong there. Occasions which are, in a sense, their own and are variously described in the literature as convivial, informal, recreational, or social in nature; the other kind of occasion is sometimes called "serious" or "formal." Obviously a recreational occasion may have small periods within it devoted to serious activity, and serious occasions may have small parts devoted to recreation. Also, we find that persons attend supposedly serious occasions just for the convivial pleasure of being with people and that persons attend supposedly convivial occasions for what we call "ulterior" motives; in both cases, however, the person who attends for improper reasons gives lip service to the socially defined nature of the occasion and acts as if he were attending for proper reasons. For example, during billiards at the Dixon hall, it seemed that at least one steady player, the manager of Allen's Dixon shop, played because he thought it was a good thing for himself and for the business to be represented at the occasion. He admitted privately to me that he really didn't care what kind of a score he was able to build up during a shot and was only concerned to keep the teams as evenly balanced as possible so as to ensure the interest of the players; if he found himself getting more points than his side needed to keep a little ahead, he would "let up" and not really try. What ought to have been an end in itself was for him a means to an end.

Of course, a social occasion that is properly defined as recreational for one person may be defined as serious for another. For example, the job of the caretaker of the community hall during billiard nights was to close the hall at night and see that the lights were kept in working order. The caretaker was supposed to spend the evening among the players but as a worker, not as a player. Interestingly enough, on many occasions he found himself unable to treat the occasion as a means to his livelihood; he continually got caught up in the occasion and found himself wanting to play even though he ought to have been present not as a player but as a worker. In joining

¹ Simmel, of course, makes this point, *op. cit.*, p. 45, where in comparing sociability to play he says: "Inasmuch as in the purity of its manifestations, sociability has no objective purpose, no content, no extrinsic results, it entirely depends on the personalities among whom it occurs. Its aim is nothing but the success of the sociable moment and, at most, a memory of it. Hence the conditions and results of the process of sociability are exclusively the persons who find themselves at a social gathering. Its character is determined by such personal qualities as amiability, refinement, cordiality, and many other sources of attraction." In his lectures Professor Shils has made the same point in reference to primary groups.

the play, the caretaker found it necessary to give constant assurance that he was merely filling in until others came or that he really didn't want to play at all. This effort on the part of the caretaker to stay within his role, and his ability to do so, became a standing joke with the steady players.

A final qualification must be made concerning the recreational-serious polarity. It sometimes seems that some participants obtain enjoyment and spontaneous involvement in an occasion to the degree to which the occasion provides a lowering of social barriers between themselves and persons of relatively high status. A "successful" party in Dixon, as in many other places, is often one in which a person who has previously been distant and superior to those present ceases, at least for the duration of the occasion, to maintain his usual social distance. In this sense, the occasion is a means to an external end. But in these cases, participants who are given this means are not supposed to define it as such or recognize it as such. A social occasion, it seems, can actually function as a means to an external end for a participant, and yet he may sincerely feel that all he gets from the occasion is recreation and enjoyment. The instrumentality of a recreational occasion may be unconscious, and hence the person for whom the occasion is instrumental in this sense need not feign the absence of an ulterior motive.

2. Occasions vary in the degree to which they are organized by means of preestablished explicit directives, giving us on one hand occasions which tend to be what are often called "informally organized," and on the other hand occasions which tend to be "formally organized." Formality-informality, as regards organization, is found in various factors. Three examples may be suggested.

First, a plan of operation may be explicitly specified beforehand, setting out a detailed agenda for the occasion, or, on the other hand, the plan of proceedings may tend to be implicit, with the participants deciding at any one stage in the undertaking what they will do in the next stage. In Dixon, for example, the semi-annual concert is fully programmed, performers knowing beforehand the sequence in which they will appear; family picnics, in contrast, tend to be informally organized and decisions, in contrast, tend to be informally organized and decisions as to what to do at any particular time tend not to be arrived at until it is time to act upon the decision.

Secondarily, some of the participants may be explicitly designated as officers who have the right and obligation to direct proceedings, or, on the other hand, leadership may either be inessential or develop spontaneously as a consequence of interaction during the occasion. For example, during a sheep "cawing," when shareholders in grazing rights to a particular stretch of hill work cooperatively to bring the

sheep together for dipping or shearing, one man is designated to give commands to the herders so that the sheep cannot find a weak point in the closing ring of herders and break for the hills. His word is the authorized signal for beginning or ending each phase in the operation. On the other hand, during billiards no one has the official right to say when the players ought to quit and go home; the decision comes in what looks to be a spontaneous way, although in fact it must usually be informally or implicitly authorized by the "informal" leader.

Thirdly, rights and obligations may tend to be explicitly specified in detail beforehand, with rewards and punishments specified in detail as a means of guiding behavior, or rights, obligations, and sanctions may be taken for granted and not determined explicitly until the moment arrives for exerting them. For example, at billiards, which tends to be informally organized, there is none the less a specific explicit rule that each player place two pence in an "expenses" box for each game played; at most parties in the community, no explicit duties are placed upon guests.

3. Social occasions appear to vary in the degree to which they are conducted in what has come to be thought of as a formal or an informal way. In occasions which are formally conducted, participants are obliged to restrict their activity to roles that are explicitly or implicitly defined as the main and proper ones for the occasion. In occasions which are informally conducted, participants are allowed to interact in capacities other than those defined as relevant for the occasion. Thus, in Dixon, at birthday parties, participants are fairly strongly obliged to stay within the ethos of a party and not separate themselves off, individually or in small clusters, for activity in whose spirit all participants cannot share. On the other hand, when a few friends "drop in," without special reason, the occasion tends to be informal, participants moving in and out of their role as party guests, as interest at the moment dictates.

Observations in Dixon suggest that the degree to which a given occasion is serious or convivial cannot tell us the degree to which it will be formally or informally organized, and that neither of these factors can tell us whether it will tend to be formally or informally conducted. Hence it seems useful to distinguish among the three variables, although all pertain in some way to the commonsense notion of formality-informality, a notion that has been used with little further refinement in much sociological literature.

4. Social occasions may vary according to the number of different lines of action which are defined as the main activity of the occasion. For example, in Dixon during the natural "Gala Day," several competitive sports events (such as the running broad jump, the hundred

yard dash) and several farm competitions (such as produce judging and sheep dog trials) may be defined as main activities and be in progress at adjacent places at the same time. On the other hand, the evening ceremony, during which the prizes are awarded, is part of the Gala Day's stage performance which allows for only one main activity at a time.

5. Social occasions vary according to the degree to which persons look forward to them as coming concrete entities and/or look back at them, after they are past, as things to be separated out from the flow of events in which they are embedded and seen as independent units. Regardless of what occurs at an occasion, persons tend to think of some as distinct entities and of other occasions as not. For example, an employee may know that he will be at work all day in a given place two weeks from a given moment, but he will not single out this attendance at work, or, rather, the occasion which he thereby attends, and think of it as a distinct and special thing; it will be just another work day. On the other hand, the day at work which is given over to the Christmas party may for him constitute a special occasion, to which he looks forward and to which he looks back. A party which was begun on the spur of the moment may be an occasion to which no one looked forward but to which all participants look back.

6. Social occasions seem to vary according to the degree to which they constitute "regular" occasions and form part of a series of occasions. A regular occasion is often thought of as one which occurs at the same place, at the same point in a daily, weekly, or annual time cycle, and with the same participants, as the other occasions in the series. For example, in Dixon the social occasion provided by the accidental burning down of a shop does not recur in any periodic sense; the twice-monthly showing of the rural film unit does form part of a series of recurrent showings. Recurrent or regular occasions the smiles seem to differ in subtle ways. Some series of occasions are recognized as a series; the series is looked forward to and back upon as a series, and behavior at one regular occasion may have some explicit or implicit carryover and consequence for a later similar occasion. We sometimes use the term "sessions" to refer to a series of this kind. In Dixon, there is an annual sailing boat competition that awards a cup to the boat that makes the best total score in a series of about eight races. Each race is held on Saturday night during eight successive weeks. The eight races and the eight Saturday nights are felt in certain ways to be a single unit. On the other hand, daily dinner in a Dixon household involves the same participants in the same activity at the same place, but little social recognition seems to be given to the series as a series.

In the research reported in this study, social occasions and series of occasions were not, as such, the focus of attention. The concept of social occasion has been considered because it is helpful to give some attention to what one is not, specifically, studying in order to speak more clearly about what one is studying. Furthermore, it will now be possible to talk about the context or setting in which social interaction occurs in terms that are not completely undefined. It should be noted, however, that no attempt has been made to consider other kinds of contexts which provide a setting for interaction, such as diffuse definitions of the situation that prevail in a given place and time and that lead us to feel that certain interaction is appropriate on Saturday night downtown that is not appropriate Tuesday afternoon in the factory, and that permissible behavior on New Year's Eve may everywhere be a little different from what is considered permissible at other times.