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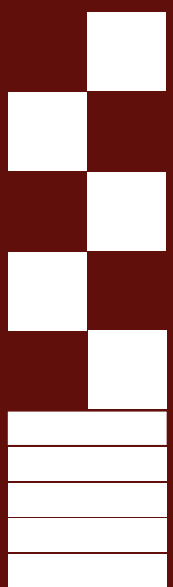
Communication Conduct in an Island Community

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 when all the participants in an interplay are sufficiently "caught up" or spontaneously involved in the proceedings, the interaction may be characterized as euphoric. To the degree that participants fail to become sufficiently involved, because of too little concern with the proceedings or too much self-concern with them, the interaction may be said to be dysphoric. The perception by one participant that another is insufficiently involved or that (as will be considered later) he is too much involved, may itself serve to make the perceiver feel ill at ease and must be considered along with the the other factors that can make a participant lose his spontaneous involvement in an interplay. So too, the perception by yet another participant that someone has perceived an offender may throw this second perceiver out of tune with the interaction. In these cases embarrassment seems to be a contagious and regenerative thing, feeding on itself, spreading from one participant to another, and from him to still others, in ever widening circles of discomfiture.

There are interplays which seem to be destined from the beginning to be dysphoric, so that persons who usually find themselves at ease in the presence of others feel out of countenance. Thus, when five or six men went with a lorry to their old schoolhouse to borrow a piano for a community concert, the presence of little desks and all the rest of the schoolroom paraphernalia to which they had been tied thirty years ago seemed to reinvade their earlier selves to such a degree that their present ones could not be maintained with equanimity. So, too, when the time came for male lambs to "lose it," as the islanders say, the presence of heaps of testicles and the necessity of holding squirming heavy lambs while castration occurred would make it difficult for workers to suppress a sexual definition of the situation, and the usual quiet work self would be disrupted by a much more bawdy one. Similarly, when a crew of men unloaded lumber which they knew had been ordered by the undertaker and was destined for coffins, it became difficult for them to suppress thoughts of their relation to eternity and to concentrate on merely being workers. At

all of these times the disruption of one's ordinary workaday self would be resolved by defining the whole situation in a joking way. At such times, participants felt that no one was responsible for the disturbance; the situation itself was felt to be responsible.

There are also occasions in which a particular person found himself playing a role that was difficult to carry off with equanimity, regardless of the poise he might have. Thus when persons are invited to weddings, either both members of a courting couple are invited or neither, since a wedding is an occasion for young guests to advertise their "intentions," a ceremony of couples walking from the church to the community hall making this explicit. There is an overriding rule, however, obliging siblings of the couple being married to sit at the ceremonial head table. Thus a brother of the bride or groom who is himself betrothed must arrange for someone to take his girl to the wedding. The person chosen finds himself in a contradictory position which he usually resolves by taking the situation unseriously.

There also seem to be certain kinds of interplay which a given person cannot handle with equanimity, although other participants do not find the same difficult and he himself is at ease in other interactions. And in any person's daily round of interplays, there are likely to be one or two individuals in whose presence he alone cannot be at ease—individuals who appear to him to be affected, or presumptuous, or insolent, or obsequious, to a degree that cannot quite be tolerated.

Our concern here, however, is that in any community there seem to be some individuals who bring offense and dysphoria to almost every interplay in which they participate, causing others to feel ill at ease whether or not the offenders themselves are embarrassed. As suggested in Chapter II, these offenders may be called faulty persons.

It is to be noted that persons who bring difficulty to many of the interactions in which they participate tend to find themselves shunned, or, if not shunned, treated in a very special way. This treatment need not be the result of organized community reaction but may be the unwitting consequence of the independent and often unthinking action of members of the community. It is to be noted further that the unsatisfactory handling of one's role in interplay is not a measure of the way in which one handles undirected communication or tasks unrelated to interaction. In Dixon, many quite faulty persons carried on the roles of parent, husband, community member, and croft worker in what was widely felt to be a very adequate way.

Perhaps the most obvious kind of faulty person is he who lacks adequate command over the linguistic skills necessary for carrying on linguistic communication in the given community. Ordinarily we assume that three types of persons may lack this qualification: there

are young children, who do not yet have the capacity to carry on a conversation; there are foreigners and outsiders who cannot manage a specific set of linguistic symbols, although they can, of course, manage other sets; there are defectives who do not have the intellectual capacity for communication or who have defective communication equipment, as in the case of the deaf, the dumb, and the blind. Defectives and foreigners, especially, qualify as faulty persons because, unlike children, the immediate response they call forth is an expectation that they will be able to interact in an adequate manner. The few households in Dixon where idiots lived seemed to be under a kind of interaction cloud; few persons not members of these households seemed to enter without first steeling themselves for the awkwardness that was to be anticipated.

Among commoners in Dixon, informal conversation is carried on solely in the community's variations of the Bergand dialect. The dialect is hardly intelligible to outsiders, and to them a Bergand version of standard English is used. Almost all commoners in Dixon feel constrained in situations where it is necessary for them to use standard English, tending to lapse back into the dialect as soon as relaxation is possible. Crofters can carry on official meetings in standard English, or make speeches in it, but for informal conversation they find it inappropriate and often impossible. Britons who come to the island for a visit or who come to stay for a time for reasons of business cannot help but disturb informal interaction in which they participate. They cannot help but jar and distract their island listeners a little when they talk; they cannot help "missing," or not catching in time, many of the truncated dialect ejaculations and introjections which form an important part of informal discourse. Statements have to be translated and repeated for them. While there are often additional reasons why outsiders cannot be absorbed into euphoric intimate interplay, lack of familiarity with the dialect is frequently sufficient to make these persons faulty.

Another kind of faulty person is to be understood in terms of the fact that individuals apparently make certain broad assumptions as to standards of physiognomic normality that all persons ought to satisfy. If the appearance of an individual departs too much from expected body form (especially in directions that are valued negatively) then other persons may be continuously distracted and diverted by the image that is presented to them. It becomes difficult for recipients to disinvolve themselves from the individual's offensive undirected communication, and they therefore find it difficult to involve themselves spontaneously in his directed communication. Few persons are sufficiently misshapen in an overall way to become faulty persons for this reason. There is, however, a significant number of persons

who have minor physical defects associated directly with their chief instruments of communication—the eyes, the lips, the voice, and the face. Tics, bare-lips, cleft palates are examples; "bad breath" is another. Such defects are, as it were, always before the eyes, ears, and nose of the recipient, causing him as much distraction as would a far greater defect less crucially located.[1] The recipient is put in the difficult position of having to direct his attention away from the sender's defects in order to avoid offending the sender and to lessen the possibility of involvement in the wrong stream of signs, while at the same time he must direct his attention to just those areas in order to show the sender that he is attending to him.

[1] Physical peculiarities are the usual but not the only types of disturbances. For example, Western people who have little experience with Hindu society often find difficulty in talking to Sikhs who wear turbans. Attention tends to waver from the race or the speaker to his head-dress.

On the island there are some persons whose faces are not, by Western standards, pleasant to look at. There is a tendency for these persons to keep silent and to keep out of the view of the sender in an interplay, except among members of their immediate family. They are thought of as "shy" and seem to content themselves with less social interaction than do others. In a sense they have sacrificed themselves (for whatever reason) to the euphoria of interaction, voluntarily withdrawing from positions in which they might afford disturbance to the interplay.

Persons with defects of this kind did not, of course, always retreat. A person seemed less likely to do so when he could feel that his defect was a superimposed characteristic and not one that he was, in a sense, morally responsible for. "It was two years before I wasn't worried about kids looking at my disfigurement, and now I don't mind at all," said one islander who had sustained an eye injury that left his face disfigured and caused him to tear continuously.

It may be mentioned that acceptable individuals sometimes became faulty persons for a brief period of time. A temporary disorder in communication equipment would render a person unable, for a while, to participate as smoothly as usual during interplay. Laryngitis, extraction of teeth preparatory to obtaining false ones, intoxication, nasal disturbances causing one to wheeze, a stiff neck—all these were common reasons for temporarily transforming the individual into a faulty person.

In the community there were a few other commoners whose behavior caused them to be at fault in many of the interplays in which they participated. A few of the islanders seemed to have been demoralized, interactionally speaking, by their rise in social status, and could not help bragging continuously about their achievements and their contacts in the non-crofter world. These persons tended to be thought of as insensitive and inflexible in their demands, and wherever they appeared others present would have to make a slight effort to keep from making apparent to their fellow-sufferers that they

thought the braggart was behaving improperly. However slight these offenses, the patience of recipients was taxed whenever they were in the presence of these few braggarts.

Two other faulty persons among commoners might be mentioned. There was one boy of nineteen who was so sensitive about the moment-to-moment view that others took of him, and so cowed and desirous to please, that even in the circle of his own family he was self-conscious, conveying this undue preoccupation with self to all with whom he had contact.[2] And there was a man, Bill White, previously alluded to, who played communication tricks; he would joke and kid like other islanders, but he did this during serious occasions, and cut his jokes so fine, acting so well the part he was toying with, and carrying on the joke for so long, that persons came to distrust him.[3] With him, one never knew where one stood, for there was no easy way to discover whether he was at any given moment serious or not. He protected himself from being considered simply mendacious by maintaining a gleeful, aggressive air in his communication, ready when forced into a corner to admit that he had only been joking.

* * * * *

In Dixon, when the gentry appeared in the presence of commoners, interactional tension occurred. This dysphoria tended to be minimal when the gentry acted in their traditional capacity, appearing on the stage during a community concert or in specially reserved seats; it tended to be quite acute when prolonged informal interplay was necessary between gentry and commoner. From the point of view of the interaction that commoners carried on, the gentry were all faulty persons. This fact seems significant enough in the life or the community and significant enough for an understanding of interaction there to warrant further elaboration and analysis. In attempting this analysis, it will be possible to extend a little the treatment in Chapter VII of sign situations.

In the sociological literature, it is assumed that a person who has roles or other attributes which qualify him for radically incompatible kinds of treatment causes sociological difficulties.[4] In many cases where an individual possesses attributes which qualify him for radically different treatments, primacy is accorded to one role in one situation and to another role in another situation.[5] Thus, for any given situation, there will always be a role defined as officially relevant and other roles defined as irrelevant. Action, then, need not break down for want of a pattern to follow.

In Dixon, there are some situations in which a genuine dilemma occurs as to which of two patterns of respect, a deferential one or an

[2] For a psychoanalytical view of this kind of conduct, see Paul Schilder, "The Social Neurosis," *Psychoanalytic Review*, XXV, 1–19.

[3] For example, during a violin performance at a house party, he would turn to his neighbor and pretend to be whispering to him in barely permissible subordinate interplay, all the while conveying by his manner that he was merely making fun of the social arrangement which allowed listeners to enter into such interplay. At a whist social he would seriously say to a fellow crofter, "You have to take an interest, you know," and later the crofter would learn that Bill had won the booby prize. Similarly, at a game of "500" among three guests in his home, he would say, with a barely perceptible twinkle, "I'll surely win the next 500," conveying almost an admission that his interest was insufficiently aroused to make this even a possibility. On another occasion, while talking to the newly arrived doctor and his wife, Bill said, "I'll be glad when these Bolsheviks are out and we get Britons back in power," knowing that everyone but the newly-arrived pair knew he was a local committee man for the Labour Party.

[4] A basic statement of this problem is given by E. C. Hughes, "Dilemmas and Contradictions of Status," *Amer. J. Sociol.*, L, 353–359. A clear example of the problem introduced by someone of indeterminate status is given by Doyle, *op. cit.*, in his discussion of the relationship established by whites to free Negroes. See especially chap. vii, "Etiquette and the Free Negro."

[5] See Talcott Parsons, *The Social System*, p. 302.

equalitarian one, the gentry are to be accorded by commoners. Explicit discussions occur among commoners as to whether or not it is proper and desirable to "sir" the laird or just to call him Mr. Alexander, and whether a special section of the seats at the annual concerts ought to be reserved for the gentry or whether they should be required like everyone else to take what is available at the time of their arrival. These discussions were heated and had to do with expressive acts which crofters ordinarily kept from consciousness, or at least kept silent about. Today no consensus exists in the community as to how these matters ought to be handled. Different commoners handle the question in different ways. But in many cases, the decision taken by a particular commoner is taken selfconsciously; he knows that other commoners act in other ways and that the whole matter is problematical. When more than one commoner is present at commoner-gentry interplay, then tension in this matter seems especially high, for each commoner tends to feel that the salutation and other gestures of respect he performs toward the gentry will be examined by the other commoners for signs of undue insolence or undue deference. The few crofters who still touch their caps to the laird feel particularly selfconscious in this context, finding themselves caught between what is for them "natural" respect and the implied claims of fellow-crofters that the laird is no longer to be treated as someone superior.

Another example may be cited. The retired doctor on the island—a person of the gentry class—has an adult son who has not succeeded in reconfirming the professional status of his father and grandfather and has taken to operating a small farm. There are a handful of commoners who accept this man as one of them, as he apparently wants to be accepted. They reciprocally first-name him and participate with him in informal convivial social occasions. For other commoners, however, he is neither fish nor fowl. They find it difficult to decide how to treat him, and when they do decide they cannot carry out the treatment in a spontaneous and unthinking way. He is for them a faulty person. Apparently he deeply feels the anomaly of his position. When in the presence of commoners, he feels constrained to talk and act more loudly than others, putting himself in what he apparently knows to be a foolish, unworthy position. Apparently he feels that the only way he can establish himself as an acceptable ordinary person is to show others, in a continuous and relentless way, that he thinks someone like himself is just as hopeless and impossible as (he feels) they think he is.

When there is a dilemma of status, embarrassment often results. However, it frequently seems that the dysphoria which occurs in these situations is not so much due to the fact that persons will decide in favor of one line of treatment or in favor of another, but that

thought and consideration has to be given to such matters. If a definition of the situation is not automatic and unthinking, then, from the point of view of interaction, it does not much matter how things come to be defined, for dysphoria is likely to arise no matter what line of treatment is finally fixed upon. This leads us to appreciate that dysphoric interaction can be caused by status difficulties much less blatant than the one that occurs during a genuine dilemma of status.

During interplay in Dixon, it is customary for certain social attributes of the participants to be declared officially irrelevant and for others to be defined as the ones which ought to determine treatment during the interaction. However there were always special circumstances which forced upon the attention of participants a role usually successfully suppressed. Thus, in a friendly interplay, the knowledge that two of the participants were married and had been for years was allowed to enter the interaction at appropriate times but could also be conveniently kept from consciousness at other times. However, when a young couple was about to get married, or had very recently been married, their new relationship was something that often could not be suppressed from attention by persons with whom they interacted. The new social fact tended to disrupt the usual inattention to such matters, causing the participants to become selfconsciously involved in the interplay. Frequently this tension seemed to be released by jokes and "kidding." Engaged persons or newly-married ones while in the presence of others frequently treated each other in a stiff and distant fashion, apparently in an attempt to counteract the effect they had upon the interaction. Thus, individuals in the process of undergoing a basic change in status tended to become, for a while, faulty persons, for their changing status could not be kept from mind in situations where it ought to have been irrelevant. The laird, who is in the process of selling his land and losing his traditional status, is partly for this reason a faulty person for the commoners.

It has been suggested that officially irrelevant roles may be handled in such a way as not to disturb the euphoria of interaction. For example, at meals in Dixon, everyone present (except infants) is given a helping of about the same size, and differences in age, sex, and kinship are momentarily set aside. However it is also expected that a participant's officially irrelevant attributes will qualify in a minor way the treatment accorded to him in his officially relevant capacities. Thus, among commoners at dinner, an adult guest of either sex will be served first, and girls and young women are expected to eat a little less than others present. Similarly, the clerks in the Dixon shops are expected to treat all customers equally; each customer has a right to be treated with a modicum of civility, to be given an equal share of rationed goods, and to be waited on in turn. Yet it is also

expected that there will be something in the tone of the treatment to distinguish islander from foreigner, crofter from gentry, kinfolk from someone unrelated. The point here is that in some situations no one seemed sure as to just how much qualification of this minor kind was to prevail and where in the interaction it was to be expressed. There would be no dilemma as to the rights and obligations to be officially acknowledged, yet there might be uncertainty over the covert recognitions to be given to the officially irrelevant statuses.

Furthermore, it seemed that when officially irrelevant statuses qualified a person for treatment that was radically different from the kind accorded him in his officially relevant role, difficulties arose. Spontaneous involvement in the interplay in terms of the officially relevant roles tended to become swamped by nervousness over potential responses that were officially irrelevant and which ought to have been suppressed. The fiction that the participant was just another participant became difficult to accept unthinkingly, even though lip-service could be paid to it without difficulty. For example, when the doctor's wife came to shop, she was treated in general like any other customer, but it was a little difficult and embarrassing to do so. On such occasions, the tendency of the person causing difficulty to "lean over backwards" to fit into officially defined patterns, or too much enter into the spirit of things, did not succeed in preventing dysphoria from occurring.

We have considered the fact that interaction between crofter and gentry on the island tended, wherever and whenever it occurred, to by dysphoric. Persons on one side did not quite know where they stood with persons on the other side, nor where they ought to stand. Every situation became a sign-situation, with persons on either side anxiously examining every event, feeling that a judgment of their officially irrelevant attributes was being conveyed, or that others might jump to the conclusion that such a valuation was being conveyed. An unthinking involvement in the actual events at hand was difficult to maintain.

It may be added that two general strategies seemed to be practiced as a means of avoiding dysphoric interaction. First, there was avoidance. Members of the gentry attempted, for example, to send the maid to do their shopping or to telephone their orders for delivery. They also attempted to attend as few community socials as possible. Secondly, joking relationships were maintained, allowing participants to take an unserious view of the confusion and dysphoria resulting from interaction between persons who could not be at ease with each other.