

1953

# Communication Conduct in an Island Community

## Erving Goffman

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Yves Winkin



*Erving Goffman*

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 I: Dixon

MORE THAN A HUNDRED miles off the coast of Britain there is a cluster of islands containing about twenty thousand inhabitants. These persons are supported by a poor economy of small-scale sheep farming and fishing. Less than ten per cent of the five hundred square miles of land on the islands is under cultivation, and, except for home-knitting for a luxury market, almost nothing is manufactured. Until recently, the population had been declining very rapidly. The policy of the national government, for various reasons, has been a protective one, helping to maintain British standards of living by means of agricultural subsidies, statutes governing the rental price of small holdings, and an extremely high *per capita* payment to the islands for upkeep of required social services.

doi

The persons who live on the islands are drawn together by a distinctive dialect, a rich cultural heritage, and what amounts to a thousand years of shared historical identity and development. The name for the cluster of islands—let us call it Bergand—is the name that an inhabitant of any one of the particular islands in the cluster is likely to identify himself by. Bergand has been under British rule for only three centuries. Until the last war, respectable Englishmen thought of Bergand as a source of seamen and servants, and the islands enjoyed—along with many other clusters of people in Britain—the status of a subordinate minority group. These factors making for distinctiveness are, of course, reinforced by the natural barrier of water between the mainland of Britain and the islands. In many ways, then, Berganders form a society unto themselves.

A fourth of the population of Bergand is concentrated in one town, hereafter called Capital City, which is located on the largest island in the cluster. There is a twice-weekly steamboat contact between the mainland of Britain and Bergand, as well as daily air service. These contacts with the outer world are tunneled through Capital City, and all formal lines of communication on the islands also lead into this point. Capital City is also the center for institutions which serve the whole cluster of islands, and in general it has something of the



ethos and something of the role of a national capital. Fashions travel outward from this town to all the islands in the cluster; people on the road to success or retirement travel in the other direction.

The island on which the study took place is a rectangular piece of rock nine miles long and four miles wide; it is covered by a thin skin of poor soil. The end link in a chain of islands, it is cut off from its only neighbor by a channel of fast water a mile wide. The island is linked with Capital City by a thrice-weekly boat service and a thrice-weekly ferry-overland service.

The typical farm holding on the island consists of five or ten acres under intensive cultivation, a similar number of acres of improved grassland, and hill grazing-rights for fifty or sixty sheep. Subsistence holdings of this kind may be called crofts. The average crofter has four or five cows and a score of ponies. The island grows not quite enough grass to feed the stock and not quite enough vegetables to feed the inhabitants. Some milk has to be imported for the school lunches. The principal sources of cash income are typical for the island cluster: the export of sheep and cattle for slaughter; the export of raw wool, hand-knitted goods, and work ponies; government payments in the form of agricultural subsidies, pensions, and unemployment relief. The size of individual holdings is limited by government policy—policy that is apparently designed to encourage land cultivation by individual family units. There are only three agricultural holdings on the island that make use of a full-time hired hand.

There are about three hundred dwelling units in use on the island. The division is based on ecological clustering, trade area, and conscious identification. Each community is centered in a fan-shaped way around a nucleus of service institutions. Each nucleus or service center is located on a part of the coast line that can serve as a harbor, and contains a community hall, a post office, a school, one or two churches, three or four stores, and a relatively dense grouping of houses. The three center points of service form a line, not a triangle, because of the narrow shape of the island. This study took place in the middle community, hereafter called Dixon. The communities lying to the north and south of Dixon will be called, respectively, Northend and Southend. For their size these communities are probably the most isolated in Britain.

Fifty years ago there were additional foci of settlement. There is some evidence that some of these contained local concentrations of extended kin. Today these settlements can be clearly seen in Northend, where economic and social consolidation is not yet complete. In general, a rapid shift of internal population is bringing persons closer and closer to the three centers of service, so that now most persons live within two miles of one of them.

In certain ways the center of service in Dixon is a center for the other two communities as well. The only usable freight pier on the island is located in the long narrow bay that serves as Dixon's harbor. Coal and gasoline supplies for the island are located at this pier and delivered from it. The only bakery on the island is attached to the principal Dixon store. This store is of the "general" kind; it is the largest on the island and to some extent provides an informal social center for all three communities. The island's chief business family, its sole practising doctor, and its resident "squire" all live in Dixon. A school that will serve all the secondary school students on the island is coming into operation in Dixon. Neither of the other two communities plays a role of like importance for the island as a whole.

The three hundred residents of Dixon are all white, Protestant (of three different denominations), and most of them have lived on the island for as many generations as those without special interest can trace. Regardless of occupation, almost all the residents are sufficiently rural in spirit to keep at least a garden of vegetables, some chickens, and a few sheep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The deepest social division in Dixon—as perhaps in most small British communities—is the one which separates persons who have gone to "Public Schools" from those who have gone to free government schools.<sup>1</sup> On the whole, persons of the kind that go to Public Schools think of themselves as being different from and superior to other kinds of Britons; in many areas of social intercourse other kinds of Britons (hereafter called "commoners") overtly accept the low status that Public School persons proffer to them. In country districts, where members of one class are likely to have known members of the other class all their lives, the division is often phrased, as it will be occasionally in this study, as one between "gentry" and "locals."

In Dixon there are two families of the gentry class; the only other family of this class on the island lives in Southend. There is the "Alexander" family, whose forebears came to Dixon over two hundred years ago from the mainland of Britain. They have been the principal resident squire of the island ever since. The second Public School family consists of "Dr. Wren" and his wife, who moved to Dixon from the mainland of Britain only a few months before the study began. Dr. Wren is the only practising doctor on the island. All the islanders are registered with him under the British free medical-service plan. He works and is worked very hard. The Alexanders and the Wrens, and the Public School family in Southend, the "Huntleys," form a friendship group. With certain limits and variations,

<sup>1</sup> Public Schools in Britain form a national training system. Their pupils are recruited from families all over the country who have high socio-economic status or aspirations in that direction. These schools provide a foundation for a nation-wide network of "personal contacts." They also foster a single set of manners, attitudes, and speech habits which can be easily distinguished from the many different local patterns of behavioral that are possessed by rural and urban persons of other social classes.

they maintain the style of life and the social distance from locals that is characteristic of the gentry everywhere in Britain.

The stereotype that the gentry have of the locals seems to be similar to the one that prevails throughout Britain. The gentry, when by themselves, spend a good deal of their time recounting the latest action of a crofter which shows how impossible crofters really are. This sort of talk is accompanied by much hilarity and by the applications to the crofters of a standard of judgment which condones the behavior of the crofters on the ground that nothing better is to be expected of persons who are not quite human. Even when crofters referred to are ones whom the speaker knows well, the general term "they" may be used with a special intonation suggesting that the term "they" is not quite a human term of reference. Frequently when a specific name is mentioned it is given a special pronunciation or twist to suggest that the person does not qualify to be referred to by ordinary statement of name. Sometimes the gentry refer to crofters (in their absence) as the natives or locals. One woman, who had lived all her life on the island, in talking to newly-arrived class-members said, "They're awfully good-tempered, you know, you have to say that about them." In her absence, another member of the gentry said, "She's awfully good with them, you know; she goes fishing with them, and goes into their kitchens and cooks with them."

Approximately two thirds of the families in the commoner class derive their principal source of income from crafting. The remaining sources of main income derive in part from the County and National governments (in the form of wages for the maintenance of roads, schools, postal services, vital statistics registration, and customs inspections, and in the form of unemployment benefits and pensions), and in part from private enterprise (in the form of wages and profits for shop owners and workers, quarry workers, lorry drivers, bakers, hotel operators, skilled craftsmen, and fishermen).

The commoners in Dixon (as apparently elsewhere in the island cluster) seem to be a patient, mannerly people with a great deal of self-control. Towards outsiders they show considerable social reserve; towards fellow-commoners who live on the island they show equalitarianism respect and a deep sense of mutual concern.

The "household" appears to be the basic social unit; while it usually contains a single immediate family, it tends to be regarded as the proper home for lineal and affinal kin who are in need of a place at which to work or in which to live. Members of a household show a great deal of kindly solicitude and affection for each other, regardless of age, sex, or kinship relation.

There are two wider social units based on the household. Each household has a "neighbourhood circle," consisting of the four or

five crofts that immediately surround it. Each household also has a "kin circle," consisting of the close relations, affinal and lineal, of the male and female heads of the household, excluding those relations who are on "bad terms" with the household. Both of these social units—sometimes separately, sometimes together—constitute an organization of mutual aid and informal social intercourse. Both circles are expected to play a role in funerals and in work crises, such as harvest.

Within the commoner class there is a growing differentiation in style of life between those who operate small crofts and those who have other kinds of full-time employment. A locally-recruited middle class is emerging, based on families that have not engaged in full-time crafting for one or two generations. Commoners show a strong resistance, however, to the tendency for this cultural split to become a consciously recognized social one. Functional explanations for this resistance can be easily suggested. The social guild between Public School people and the commoners is sufficiently great to embarrass any division that may occur within the commoner class. This is reinforced by the strong tendency for Public School people to treat all commoners in the same way, for apparently the gentry feel that once a single informal bridge is created to the commoners, the whole pattern of social distance and superordination will collapse. Kin circles are stressed as units of informal social life, and these prevent recognition of the potential class line by cutting across it. Further, an important element in the self-conception of Dixon commoners is based on their beliefs concerning the difference between natives of the island cluster and all other Britons. This mode of self-judgment undermines the attempt of some commoners to construct a basic image of themselves in terms of invidious distinctions between themselves and other commoners. Finally, the chief merchant family of the island has, up to the present, held itself apart "socially" from the commoners, thus failing to play the important role in class formation that families of this kind typically play in an island cluster.

In Dixon there are two families which are not placed socially either with the commoners or with the Public School class. One of these families consists of the island's previous doctor, now a much-respected, aged, and ailing man; his son; and his daughter. Both daughter and son are in their early middle years. Both are unmarried.

The other marginal family, the "Allens," are the chief merchants on the island. The family came as ordinary commoners from another island in the cluster three generations ago, and for two generations they have been the most economically powerful family on the island. One branch of the family ran a larger sheep farm at the time of the

study but has since moved to the mainland of Britain. The remaining unit of the family consists of a man, his wife, and a son, "Ted," in his twenties. They own the principal shops in all three communities, the pier, the bakery, the mineral rights for the island. They have the coal agency for the island. They hire two craftsmen to build boats. They operated a woolen mill for a time, with the aid of a son-in-law. They give full-time employment to about thirty persons in the community. The potentially autocratic position of the Allen family is not felt nearly so strongly as it might be. Several explanations can be suggested. Government regulations regarding employment and prices provide one kind of limitation; alternate channels of supply (especially mail-order) provide another. In addition, the recent generation of Allens seems to have genuine paternalistic feelings of responsibility toward the economic welfare of the islanders.

It should be added that the crofters, on the whole, seem to approve of the Allens. Stories are often told and retold of the times that the Allens kept men at work even though it had to be "made" work, of the time they helped to re-establish a family that had been burned out, of the fact that their prices may not be low but that they are not higher than prices in other places, of the fact that the Allens have invested in industry which brought employment for the men of the island but losses to the owners. Less explicitly, there is the feeling that the Allens have chosen to remain on the lonely island, and that the gratifying present relative poverty of the squire is due to the financial cunning of the previous Allen generation. This positive attitude seems to prevail even though the social distance that the Allens have maintained for two generations from their fellow-islanders is not usual on Bergand islands.

The Allen family has always recruited wives and friends from outside the local commoner group. For the last two generations they have maintained the style of life of Public School people. Commoners treat the Allens as if this family were of the Public School class, and the three families in that class are on intimate "social" terms with the Allens and treat them almost as equals. It is interesting to note that Ted Allen is so far an exception to this social pattern. He is treated with social acceptance by the Public School class, while at the same time he seeks and finds social equality and intimacy with some commoners in Dixon. His orientation towards commoners seems to be both cause and effect of the emerging middle class.

In addition to commoners and Public School people, there are certain other categories of persons who play a role in the social life of Dixon. Throughout the year, but especially from May to September, flushing boats dock at the Dixon pier, remaining from an hour to a week. Crews from the boats buy supplies at the local stores and

exchange fish for money or fresh eggs with local residents. Also, tourists come to the community during the summer to fish for trout or watch birds for a week or two, or to spend one evening of a steam-boat excursion on a remote and rugged island. Finally, throughout the year commercial travellers visit the island to make a round of its stores, and officials come on government business.

\* \* \* \* \*

This study is mainly concerned with events which occurred in the social life of commoners that are native to Dixon. The study is particularly concerned with three of the social settings in which events of this kind regularly occurred: socials, billiards, and the hotel.

## SOCIALS

Every year from September to March a social is held in the Dixon community hall approximately every second week. Each social is advertised in the stores and post office of all three communities. In most cases, anyone who reads the advertisements is free to come. Bus service from central points all over the island is provided two or three times during the evening. Attendance varies from sixty to two hundred persons, most of whom live in Dixon. Northend and Southend hold similar fortnightly socials. A third of the population of Dixon attends socials regularly. Direct observations were made at almost all of the socials held in Dixon and Northend during the twelve months of study.

In Dixon (as in the other two communities on the island) two formal voluntary associations exist which provide committee machinery for most of the community undertakings. There is the "Dixon Workingmen's Association," which owns the community hall and is open for membership to all male residents of the community, and the "Women's Rural Institute," which is open to all resident females in the community. The management of a social usually involves formal cooperation by both of these associations.

The pattern of organization for socials is well established and helps to solve the organizational problems for many of the other large-scale social undertakings that occur in the community. The first part of a social consists of planned entertainment, starting at eight o'clock in the evening and lasting for about three hours. A short intermission is observed for tea and buns, and then the second part of the social, a dance, is held. The dance lasts until about two-thirty in the morning, depending, it is said, on the energy and spirit of the dancers. Admission price for the whole evening is usually two

shillings and six pence, but separate tickets at a lower rate may be bought for the entertainment or the dancing.

The entertainment part of a social usually consists of "progressive" whist played for seven or eight small prizes. Twice a year instead of whist there is a "bring and buy sale" where contributed goods, usually home-produced, are auctioned. Twice a year the entertainment is provided by a "concert" consisting of a short play, vocal and instrumental solos, and recitations—all performed by local talent. Persons from six to eighty participate actively in all of these forms of entertainment.

The dance part of the social consists (with certain seasonal exceptions) exclusively of "country-style" dancing: "quadrilles," "lancers," "gay gordons," "St. Bernard's waltz," "old fashioned waltz," and "Boston two-step." Almost all the dancers are between thirteen and forty-five, although it is expected that persons outside this age range will watch the dancing from a single row of benches that line the walls of the dance floor. Music from the hall stage is provided by a piano and an accordion or violin. Musicians are recruited from the audience on a volunteer basis; in one evening three or four different sets of players may be used. Intermission teas are served once or twice during the evening's dance. As the evening wears on, the age range narrows until persons of courting age are almost the only ones that remain.

In Dixon there are some large-scale social occasions at which attendance may be regarded as an obligation and responsibility: the annual Christmas party and concert; the two or three "church socials" held each year in each of the churches; the semi-annual "bulb show" of flowers; the annual summer regatta and annual "gala day." Public School people join with the commoners in these kinds of occasions. However only commoners and occasionally an island visitor appear at ordinary socials. On the whole, socials seem to express and consolidate the feeling that all native commoners are socially accessible to and socially equal with one another, and that no one will desert the hard life of the island or their identification with crofters. Lately there has come to be a twice-monthly showing of a 16 mm. motion picture, but attendance seems more to divide the community—into those who go and those who do not—than to integrate the community.

It should be added, perhaps, that elaborate community machinery for carrying out community-wide social events is not given allegiance by some members of the community. Many of the male crofters take the view that they are too tired or too busy to attend the socials. On the whole, it is those of crofters class who have non-crafting sources of income who form the hard core of attendants and officers. There is

thus one community composed of persons who have gone to school with each other, known each other all their lives, intermarried, and another one, set within the first, composed of all those who are "active" in formally organized community affairs. In certain respects, each of these communities gives the appearance of being the only one.

## BILLIARDS

In the Dixon community hall there is a room called the "reading-room." It is about twenty feet wide and thirty feet long, and one wall is shelved with about four hundred books. About twenty-five persons in Dixon regularly make use of this library

In the center of the room is a standard three-quarter length billiard table. The table top is geared to an axle, and with the top turned over the table is used for most of the formal meetings that are held in the community. Except for the cushions, which are almost dead, the table is in good condition. There are four cues, one of them short, one of them cracked, and a set of snooker and billiard balls. Snooker is rarely played. English billiards is played in accordance with standard rules for this game. Billiards is officially open to any member of the Dixon Workingmen's Association and any guests of a member. According to a formal rule that is often broken, the billiard season is from October to May, and play is held on Monday and Saturday nights from seven to eleven-thirty. At the end of each evening of play, each player deposits three pence for every game he has played, in order to defray the cost of fuel, lights, and servicing on the part of the hall caretaker.

Observations were made during almost every evening of billiards that occurred during the period of field work. During this period approximately fifteen persons came to be recognized as billiard players. Half of these were steady players who could be expected to appear almost every night that billiards was held; the other half consisted of occasional players who spent two or three nights a month at the game. Most of the players were of the oldest fully-active generation, from about fifty to sixty-five years old. A third of the players were of the youngest generation that was fully active in community life, that is, persons in their late twenties and early thirties. One or two players fell between the two age groups.

It was apparent that those who have acquired the habit of playing billiards in Dixon do not represent a socially haphazard selection from the total population of the community. The players do not share a particular social characteristic that is not also shared by some non-players. The *set* of characteristics which most of them possessed,



however, was almost exclusively theirs: residential proximity to the hall; full-time employment other than crofting; official role in the Dixon Workingmen's Association.

Billiards in Dixon can be understood in terms of the social functions it performs for the community. It provides a place where some of the organizational business of the community can be carried on under conditions which ensure informality. It provides an opportunity for some of the older community leaders to give informal training to some of the future community leaders. It ensures a wide channel of communication of a point of strong solidarity between the oldest and the youngest active adult generation.

It is interesting to note that the managers of Allen stores in Dixon and Southend are players. Ted Allen and the chief assistant of the Allen store in Dixon also play. All four of these persons play regularly except the manager of the Southend Allen Store. In general it appears that billiards provides one of the ways in which the Allen business organization ensures lines of solidarity with the commoner class—the class from which it draws its employees and customers.

In this study, attention is not directed to the social functions of billiards for Dixon. The study is more directly concerned with aspects of the game that can be described with very little reference to anything beyond the room in which the game is played.

## THE HOTEL

In Dixon there are two hotels, the only ones on the island. One of the hotels is very little used and used only in the summer. In this study no attention is focused on it. The other hotel has fourteen guest rooms which are filled by tourists from the mainland of Britain during July and August. This hotel is kept open all year round for the overnight convenience of occasional travelling salesmen and governing agents. It has also been used during the winter by families of the Public School class whose houses were being remodeled. It is referred to in this study as "the hotel."

The hotel is owned, operated, and lived in by the "Tates," a couple of the island-born commoner class in their early middle years. During the busy summer season a staff of six is maintained, all of whom usually live on the premises during the period of their employment. During the long winter there will be no hired staff, or a staff of one or two maids, depending on whether or not the hotel has any semi-permanent winter guests.

The hotel was once the home of the Allen family. During the last war the Royal Air Force rented the building from its present owners and added an extension for use as a dormitory. Some years ago the

Allen family ran a hotel in Dixon, where Mrs. Tate received some experience in hotel management. The Allens no longer operate a hotel. The Tate hotel now represents perhaps the biggest operation undertaken on the island by commoners; its success is a symbol for many persons on the island of the potential ability of commoners.

Mr. and Mrs. Tate play leading roles in the organized social life of the community. They also play a role in the maintenance of solidarity between Dixon and Northend, since Mrs. Tate was born and raised in Northend; she is still known as a "Northend lass."

It is customary for the leading belles of Dixon to spend a summer or two at the hotel in the capacity of kitchen maid, upstairs maid, or waitress. The pay is good, and the girls frequently claim that they take the work mainly in order to earn money for especially attractive clothes. For most of the twelve months of study, two of these girls, "Jean Andrews" and "Alice Simon," worked at the hotel. Both were in their early twenties. During the summer the hotel always hires a Dixon commoner, "Bob Hunter," as cook; he is about thirty years old, unmarried, and lives during the winter on his family's croft. For the last few years, Jean Andrews, Alice Simon, and Bob Hunter have formed the core of the hired hotel staff.

The hotel itself plays an important role in the community. During the summer the hotel buys a great deal of food from the local stores and nearby crofters and is important economically in this way. It plays a major role in maintaining Dixon as a practical place for tourist interest. The annual influx of tourists serves, apparently, as comforting evidence to local residents that Dixon has a place of value in Britain. The immediate presence of middle and upper-class guests serves the entire staff as a learning situation for approved patterns of conduct. The hotel serves in this way as a center of diffusion of higher class British values.

During the first two months of the study, Dr. Wren and his wife were permanent guests of the hotel. They were waiting for the county to purchase and remodel the building that was to become their house. During these two months I stayed in the hotel in the capacity of a guest and took my meals with the Wrens and all occasional hotel guests at a small dining room table. When the Wrens moved, I moved into a vacant cottage, returning to the hotel kitchen for meals with the staff. I ate one meal with them almost every week-day for six months. During a summer I also worked part time in the hotel scullery as second dishwasher. It was therefore possible to make a long series of mealtime observations both as a guest of the hotel and as a member of its kitchen staff, in this way getting two different views of the same process.