



BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC PLACES

Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings

Erving Goffman

"... an important book, witty, provocative and profound, which handles into many important areas of social science."

Sociology and Social Research

"Professor Goffman's work is abstracted, once again, that sociology's presentation of self, by such a use the author has clear, concise, and to the point without running the risk of substituting more professional tests and passes for genuine scholarship. The purpose of this book is to develop a framework capable of dealing with an almost neglected area of social reality: behavior in public and semipublic places. Goffman feels that the distinct features of face-to-face interaction, richness of interaction flow, and facilitation of feedback, have enough structuring significance to provide an analytical rationale for its separate treatment. It is to his credit that this model takes advantage of already existing and well-defined terminology, while introducing only a few new and relatively unambitious concepts."—*The Sociological Quarterly*

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CHAPTER I

The Problem

IN DIAGNOSING mental disorder and following its hospital course, psychiatrists typically cite aspects of the patient's behavior that are "inappropriate in the situation." Since this special kind of misconduct is believed to provide one obvious sign of "mental sickness," psychiatrists have given much time to these improprieties, developing the orientation and observational skills needed to study them, describing them in detail, seeking to understand their meaning for the patient, and obtaining a mandate to discuss them in the academic press—a mandate required because many of these delicts are petty, embarrassing, or messy. We sociologists should be grateful for this harvest, all the more so because it has been brought in by delicate hands. We can express our gratitude by trying to appropriate the yield for our own market, offering in exchange some observations about social situations that we appropriated long ago from anthropology.

By and large, the psychiatric study of situational improprieties has led to studying the offender rather than the rules and social circles that are offended. Through such studies, however, psychiatrists have inadvertently made us more aware of an important area of social life—that of behavior in public and semipublic places. Although this area has not been recognized as a special domain for sociological inquiry, it perhaps should be, for rules

of conduct in streets, parks, restaurants, theaters, shops, dance floors, meeting halls, and other gathering places of any community tell us a great deal about its most diffuse forms of social organization.

Sociology does not provide a ready framework that can order these data, let alone show comparisons and continuities with behavior in private gathering places such as offices, factory floors, living rooms, and kitchens. To be sure, one part of "collective behavior"—riots, crowds, panics—has been established as something to study. But the remaining part of the area, the study of ordinary human traffic and the patterning of ordinary social contacts, has been little considered. It is well recognized, for instance, that mobs can suddenly emerge from the peaceful flow of human traffic, if conditions are right. But little concern seems to have been given to the question of what structure this peaceful intercourse possesses when mob formation is not an issue. It is the object of this report to try to develop such a framework. Some data have been drawn from a study of a mental hospital¹ (hereafter called Central Hospital), some from a study of a Shetland Island community² (hereafter called Shetland Isle), some from manuals of etiquette, and some from a file where I keep quotations that have struck me as interesting. Obviously, many of these data are of doubtful worth, and my interpretations—especially of some of them—may certainly be questionable, but I assume that a loose speculative approach to a fundamental area of conduct is better than a rigorous blindness to it.

I will rely on the familiar distinction between acts that are approved and acts that are felt to be improper. This simple dichotomy makes for economy of presentation, allowing me to bypass unresolved issues and to proceed to ones that might be resolved. Before taking this license, however, some matters it covers should be mentioned.

1. Saint Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D.C. This is a 7000-bed Federal hospital, which functions chiefly as the public mental hospital for the District of Columbia.

2. A community of 800 with a subsistence farming economy studied for a year in 1949-51, reported in part in E. Goffman, "Communication Conduct in an Island Community" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, University of Chicago, 1953).

Although some specific illustrations used in this report are taken from sources dealing with non-Western society, my own experience has been mainly with middle-class conduct in a few regions of America, and it is to this that most of my comments apply. An act can, of course, be proper or improper only according to the judgment of a specific social group, and even within the confines of the smallest and warmest of groups there is likely to be some dissensus and doubt. The degree of dissensus or consensus in a group concerning the propriety of an act—and even the boundaries of the group itself—cannot be established by my assertions but only by systematic empirical research. This report, however, is full of such unverified assertions. Yet this avowed weakness should not be confused with one that is disavowed: nowhere in this report do I mean to convey that I personally hold some act to be proper or improper, although the method of presentation may occasionally give this impression.

It is in the context of this middle-class point of reference that I want to explain my use of quotations from etiquette manuals. When Mrs. Emily Post makes a pronouncement as to how persons of cultivation act, and how other persons ought therefore to act, sociologists often become offended. Their good reason for snubbing Mrs. Post is that she provides little evidence that the circle about which she speaks has any numerical or social significance, that its members do in fact conduct themselves as she says they do, or even that these persons—or any others—consider that one *ought* so to conduct oneself.

These doubts impute much more creativity to etiquette writers than they possess. Although these writers do not empirically test their claims as to what is regarded as proper, it seems to me they are still describing some of the norms that influence the conduct of our middle classes, even though on many occasions other factors will predominate. Moreover, these books are one of the few sources of suggestions about the structure of public conduct in America. It is my feeling that the main drawback to using these books as data for social science is not the unvalidated nature of the statements they contain—for statements can always be checked by research—but rather that these books tend to

provide a mere catalogue of proprieties instead of an analysis of the system of norms underlying those proprieties.

In America only a few sociologists, such as W. Lloyd Warner, and a few historians, such as Arthur M. Schlesinger,² have given attention to etiquette manuals; I know of even fewer psychiatrists who consider that they are dealing with the same issues as do these books. Yet it might be argued that one of the best guides to a systematic understanding of the observable conduct of mental patients in and out of hospitals, and of others' response to this conduct, is to be found in etiquette manuals.

In addition to the question of evidence, there is another problem in using the naive distinction between approved and disapproved behavior; namely, that the concept of approval itself is by no means innocent, covering an array of ill-explored variables.

One variable has to do with the strength of approval for upholding the rule. Some approved acts receive applause upon performance, as when heroism or very great skill is displayed. Some pass quite unnoticed and do not constitute a felt event, as when an American high-school girl refrains from wearing nylon hose with her saddle shoes but wears bobby socks instead.³

A second variable has to do with the consequence of failing to uphold the rule. At one extreme are acts, neither demanded nor expected, that are rarely performed. Some of these are recorded in etiquette books as exemplary instances of meticulous courtesy, more to illustrate the ideal forces that it is felt should be at work in society than to provide a recipe for daily living. At the other extreme are mandatory acts such as the paying of fines, where failure to comply may lead to jail. Between these extremes are "tolerated" acts, which are specifically noted with only an inhibited frown, constituting offenses that the offended person, given the setting, is obliged to let pass.

Nor do these two variables, a type of approval and a type of

2. Specifically in his *Learning How to Behave* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946).

3. C. W. Gordon, *The Social System of the High School* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1957), p. 118.

disapproval, in their various combinations, complete the picture. The whole matter is further complicated by the fact that these two variables often refer not to concrete kinds of acts, such as the raising of one's hat to a lady, but to classes of acts, the members of which are phenomenally different but normatively equivalent and substitutable in the setting. And even these classes are themselves of various sizes. For example, the requirement of "formal dress" may oblige a woman to wear her only evening dress, whereas the requirement "afternoon dress," equally a normative stipulation, is one the individual may satisfy through what she feels is freedom to choose among her three afternoon ensembles. Freedom of choice within a class of required conduct may blind the individual to constraint regarding the class as a whole.

It can be seen, then, how much mischief may be done by equating two situations because the same act is "approved" in each, since approval itself can mean significantly different things. I can only note that in this report one type of approved act will be of central importance—the "negatively eventful" kind, which gives rise to specific negative sanctions if not performed, but which, if it is performed, passes unperceived as an event.

A prefatory conceptual note must be added here. A conceptual model frequently employed these days in the social sciences is the "closed natural system." Such a system of concrete behavior involves a differentiation of activities whose integration, one with another, allows for the emergence of overall functions maintained through an equilibrium of interaction of the component activities. Presumably, the equilibrium can be of different kinds—self-corrective, moving, and the like.

A less complicated conceptual model is the "game." In the standard "zero-sum" type there is an orderly exchange of moves among a small number of teams, the moves being made in accordance with restricting rules. The moves made by one team add up to a single line of effort directed toward frustrating the design of the other teams' action, the whole game engendering

a single unfolding history of mutually oriented, antagonistic lines of action.⁵

In this report I propose to employ a framework that is much simpler than that of the natural system or the game, but more inclusive: the model of "social order." Briefly, a social order may be defined as the consequence of any set of moral norms that regulates the way in which persons pursue objectives. The set of norms does not specify the objectives the participants are to seek, nor the pattern formed by and through the coordination or integration of these ends, but merely the modes of seeking them. Traffic rules and the consequent traffic order provide an obvious example. Any social system or any game may be viewed quite properly as an instance of social order, although the perspective of social order does not allow us to get at what is characteristically systemic about systems or what is gamelike about games.

There appear to be many types of social order, of which the legal order and the economic order are important examples. Within each such order, mere behavior is transformed into a corresponding type of conduct. Particular concrete acts, of course, are likely to be performed in accordance with the regulations of more than one of these orders.

In this study I shall try to be concerned with one type of regulation only, the kind that governs a person's handling of himself and others during, and by virtue of, his immediate physical presence among them; what is called face-to-face or immediate interaction will be involved.

Here a note should be added about the term "public." The norms supporting public order, as public order is traditionally defined, regulate not only face-to-face interaction but also matters that need not entail immediate contact between persons: for example, during medieval times, the obligation (often ill-sustained) to keep one's pigs out of the streets, even though

5. There are "non-zero-sum" games of coordination and collaboration, but the analysis of these games seems to start with zero-sum games.

there was much available there for pigs to eat,⁶ and the obligation to extinguish lights and fires by a given hour lest the town be endangered by fire.⁷ Nowadays, a householder is obliged to maintain his walks and roads in good repair and to keep his town land free of noxious refuse. In addition, public order traditionally refers more to the regulation of face-to-face interaction among those members of a community who are not well acquainted than it does to interaction occurring in private walled-in places where only familiars meet. Traditionally, "public places" refer to any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community; "private places" refer to soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather—the traditional concern for public order beginning only at the point where a private gathering begins to intrude upon the neighbors. Although I will use these terms in these traditional ways, it should be appreciated that no analytical significance is implied. In the study of *groups*, the distinction between primary and secondary and between private and public meeting places may indeed be significant, but in the study of *gatherings*, all occasions when two or more persons are present to one another can be fruitfully treated initially as a single class.

We will deal, then, with the component of behavior that plays a role in the physical traffic among people. Although it may be felt that this involves conduct of little weight, a matter merely of etiquette and manners, there have always been writers, such as Della Casa, who have provided hints that it is important, and why:

For though generosity, loyalty, and moral courage are without doubt nobler and more praiseworthy qualities than charm and courtesy, nevertheless polite habits and a correct manner of speech and behaviour may benefit those who possess them no less than a noble spirit and a stout heart benefit others. For since each one of us is daily obliged to meet other people and converse with them, we

6. G. T. Salusbury, *Street Life in Medieval England* (Oxford: Pen-in-Hand, 1948), pp. 65-69.

7. "Curfew," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (14th ed., 1947), 5, 873-874.

need to use our manners many times each day. But justice, fortitude, and the other virtues of the higher and nobler sort are needed less frequently. We are not required to practice generosity or mercy at all hours, nor could any man do so very often. Similarly, those who are endowed with courage and strength are seldom called upon to show their valour by their deeds.⁸

Before proceeding, there are some ready answers to the question of proper public conduct that should be mentioned.

There are many social settings that persons of certain status are forbidden to enter. Here an effort to prevent penetration of ego-boundaries, contamination by undesirables, and physical assault seems to be involved.

Rules of trespass, for example, prevent unauthorized individuals from entering a private dwelling place at any time, and a semiprivate one during off hours. Less familiar are the many rulings that restrict the right to be present in open, unwalled public places: in nineteenth-century London, for example, the exclusion of certain categories from some parks, and the informal exclusion of common people from tiding promenades such as Rotten Row; in Islamic cities built on a *quartier* basis, the restriction of persons to their own neighborhood after dark; the temporary prohibitions, during periods of martial law, upon being about after dark; evening curfews making it illegal for youths below a certain age to be about without the company of an adult; boarding-school rulings about late-hour presence on town streets; military rulings placing certain areas out of bounds or off limits for categories of personnel; informal police rulings requiring night-time racial segregation on public streets in designated areas of the city.

Where these rules of exclusion exist, it is plain that the individual's mere presence, regardless of his conduct while present, communicates either that he possesses the entrance qualifications or that he is behaving improperly. Here we find one motive for either wanting to enter a particular place or wanting not to be seen in it.

⁸ G. Deila Casa, *Galileo*, trans. R. S. Pine-Griffin (London: Penguin Books, 1958), pp. 21-22.

I have suggested that in many situations certain categories of persons may not be authorized to be present, and that should they be present, this in itself will constitute an improper act. Common sense, however, also has something to say about those who are authorized to be present. The rule of behavior that seems to be common to all situations and exclusive to them is the rule obliging participants to "fit in." The words one applies to a child on his first trip to a restaurant presumably hold for everyone all the time: the individual must be "good" and not cause a scene or a disturbance; he must not attract undue attention to himself, either by thrusting himself on the assembled company or by attempting to withdraw too much from their presence. He must keep within the spirit or ethos of the situation; he must not be *de trop* or out of place. Occasions may even arise when the individual will be called upon to act as if he fitted into the situation when in fact he and some of the others present know this is not the case; out of regard for harmony in the scene he is required to compromise and endanger himself further by putting on an air of one who belongs when it can be shown that he doesn't. A brave instance may be cited from an early American etiquette book:

If you should happen to be paying an evening visit at a house, where, unknown to you, there is a small party assembled, you should enter and present yourself precisely as you would have done had you been invited. To retire *precipitately* with an apology for the intrusion would create a *scene*, and be extremely awkward. Go in, therefore, converse with ease for a few moments, and then retire. Take care to let it be known the next day, in such a way as that the family shall hear of it, that you were not aware that there was any company there.⁹

No doubt different social groupings vary in the explicitness with which their members think in such terms, as well as in the phrases selected for doing so, but all groupings presumably have some concern for such "fitting in."

⁹ *The Laws of Etiquette*, by "A Gentleman" (Philadelphia: Carey, Lee and Blanchard, 1850), pp. 77-78.

The notion of "fitting in" relates to another bit of common sense: what is proper in one situation may certainly not be proper in another. The underlying general scrutiny possessed by the individual—where in fact he has one—may have to give way to the requirements of the situation. This theme appears in social science literature in the form of "situational determinism," for example, in race relations studies, where it is pointed out that caste-like taboos in one sphere of life can exist alongside equalitarianism in other spheres, although the same set of persons is involved.¹⁰

But here surely is the beginning of inquiry, not the end. Although an individual may conduct himself in a particular way solely because of the felt pressure of propriety, this merely tells us about one possible motive for conforming. We still do not know *why* this particular form of conduct is the one here approved—namely, how the ruling arose historically, and what its current social function is. To approach these issues, I must turn to a more roundabout analysis.

10. See, for example, J. Lohman and D. Reitzel, "Note on Race Relations in Mass Society," *American Journal of Sociology*, 58 (1952), 240-246; C. Rogler, "Some Situational Aspects of Race Relations in Puerto Rico," *Social Forces*, 27 (1949), 72-77.