

Chalice: for Fools Everywhere

The fool role was institutionalized in the royal courts of medieval Europe: fools could show no respect for anyone, including the king; but they did not show self-respect either, could not claim the respect of others. The decline of the fool role might be a loss...there might be too much respect for authority. One of the nice things about having children around is that they can and will play the fool....sometimes.

Flanders and Swann, "The Reluctant Cannibal," thanks to John Grindrod

1. "Embarrassment" seems to be a primary emotion, so that it hardly needs a definition. Almost all of us have experienced it repeatedly. People who cannot experience embarrassment are likely to be defined as morally faulty, as shameless, hence as not quite complete human beings. As an emotion is combines mental and physiological states. We can recognize the physical signs of embarrassment in ourselves and others: blushing, fumbling, stuttering, an unusually low- or high-pitched voice, quavering speech, sweating, tremor of the hand, lowering of the eyes, nervous fingering of the clothing, stammering, constricting of the diaphragm, a dazed sensation, dryness of the mouth, and so on. The experience might be more or less severe. It can come on suddenly, and then gradually ebb, or it can be present at the same level throughout an encounter, for what might seem to be an eternity. (Goffman in **Interaction Ritual**, pp. 97-100)

Generally we experience embarrassment when we are in the presence of others, and those are the situations I will be concerned with this morning. We can experience the emotion when we are alone, but even then we are likely to be imagining how we would appear to others if they were present. When we do become embarrassed, we find it difficult to continue interacting with others. Others find it difficult not to notice our embarrassment, and they may become embarrassed for us; that is, the state of embarrassment can be contagious.

2. There seems to be no social encounter which cannot become embarrassing to one or more of its participants. I want now to have some of you describe some of the cases of embarrassment you have had yourselves or have witnessed. We shouldn't neglect the everyday, garden variety of embarrassment. I am quite poor at remembering names, for example, and that is a recurrent cause of embarrassment. One might conceal the fact of forgetting in a two-person encounter, but when a third person is present who doesn't know the person whose name you have forgotten, you can't escape --- either you are going to appear rude for forgetting the name, or for failing to introduce one acquaintance to the other.

Cases????? (see following)

Compliments

e.g., my electronic Valentine's Day message to Doleta, reported here last Valentine's Day.

Becoming the center of positive attention in other ways:

Sudden change in status

Physical closeness

Physical bearing,
 appearance - *Barb Park*
- being in 2 minutes
 having the wrong clothing
 or wrongly assembled (the unzipped fly)

Other physical attributes
 such as stuttering

2. One can argue that what seems to be common in these situations is that an individual makes claims to have a certain kind of respectable identity which become discredited. Erving Goffman argued that others continually make judgments about what kind of people we are on the basis of the impressions that we intentionally or unintentionally give off. But, in the course of an encounter, additional information may be produced which are inconsistent with what has gone before. Here is the way Goffman put it in his essay on Embarrassment"

"Embarrassment has to do with unfulfilled expectations. . . . The expectations relevant to embarrassment are moral..but embarrassment does not arise from the breach of **any** moral expectation, for some infractions give rise to resolute moral indignation and no uneasiness at all. Rather we should look to those moral obligations which surround the individual in only one of his capacities, that of someone who carries on social encounters....

"During interaction the individual is expected to possess certain attributes, capacities, and information which, taken together, fit together into a self that is at once coherently unified and appropriate for the occasion. Through the expressive implications of his stream of conduct, through mere participation itself, the individual effectively projects this acceptable self into the interaction, although he may not be aware of it, and the others may not be aware of having so interpreted his conduct. That the same time he must accept and honor the selves projected by the other participants. The elements of a social encounter, then, consist of effectively projected claims to an acceptable self and the confirmation of like claims on the part of the others. . . .

"When an event throws doubt upon or discredits these claims, then the encounter finds itself lodged in assumptions which no longer hold. The responses the parties have made ready are now out of place and must be choked back, and the interaction must be reconstructed. At such times the individual whose self has been threatened (the individual **for** whom embarrassment is felt) and the individual who threatened him may both feel ashamed of what together they have brought about...." (pp. 105f)

(A subtle example: my interaction with a student at an awards banquet, where are assumptions about her racial identity were not properly aligned.)

3. Embarrassment can be quite painful, not only for the person whose claims have become discredited, but for others in the situation as well. Therefore we are usually motivated to avoid proudding embarrassing incidents or to repair the damage when an incident has occurred. How to avoid or repair embarrassing incidents is one of the topics dealt with by experts on etiquette, and Goffman made good use of their works. We may call an individual **poised** if he or she is adept at avoiding becoming embarrassed and at recovering from embarrassment. We may call individuals **tactful** if they do not cause embarrassment in others and if they are good at bringing situations of embarrassment back to normal.

Being tactful requires being perceptive. Tactless individuals often seem to be unable to perceive embarrassment in others. There is a variety of tactics that might be used by tactful persons. For example:

--- Avoidance: "The surest way for a person to prevent threats to his face is to avoid contacts in which these threats are likely to occur. In all societies one can observe this in the avoid~~ance~~ relationship and in the tendency for certain delicate transactions to be conducted by go-betweens." [A match-maker is a good example: the match-maker can avoid the embarrassment that might be produced when a proposal of marriage is rejected.] "Similarly...members know the value of voluntarily making a gracious withdrawal before an anticipated threat to face has had a chance to occur." [Thus, when one becomes embarrassed in an encounter one may express a desire to "drop through the floor;" it's better to leave before this happens.

--- One may alert others to one's presence or to one's characteristics so that they will avoid embarrasssing themselves. Thus, it's sometimes a good idea to knock before entering a bathroom. Or a Jew might wish to indicate his or her Jewishness early in an encounter with strangers who might otherwise produce embarrassing anti-semitic remarks.

--- One may choose to ignore that which could produce embarrassment in others. This can get tricky. If one ignores the unzipped fly of a man with whom one is conversing, he might be doubly embarrassed when he discovers his error later on. The trick is to simultaneously not notice the problem and induce the fellow to correct it. The same kind of savoir faire has been demonstrated by some people whose names I have forgotten, so that I cannot introduce them to third parties. They will notice my forgetfulness, being perceptive, but won't make this public, and they will find a way of introducing themselves to the third party, although the rule in our society is that one doesn't usually introduce one's self to strangers.

--- One can deny the seriousness of the offense, laugh it off. This can be tricky as well: one must laugh with the person who has been embarrassed, not at him. Note that this denial of seriousness can only be done by others, not by the person who has become embarrassed.

--- In all of this, one can usually count on the cooperation of others. Thus a tactful young man will not ask a women for a date on New Years Eve too long before the event, before she can plausibly plead a conflicting engagement. By asking late enough, he can allow her to reject the invitation without causing embarrassment to either party. Of course, asking for a date too late would be tactless.

4. Of course, one cannot always expect others to cooperate in avoiding one's embarrassment. Sometimes people try to cause other's to become embarrassed. This can be the result of real malice or more simply a practical joking attitude. It may be done for more instrumental reasons. E.g., about 50 years ago the English humorist Stephen Potter wrote a book titled **Gamesmanship: or How to Win Games Without Actually Cheating**. E.g., if one induces the other side in a tennis match to dress wrong for the occasion, and hence become embarrassed, one improves one's chances of winning. Or sometimes attempts at mutual embarrassment may be part of a game. Such games exist in many subcultures, such as "playing the dozens" in some American black subcultures.

5. Such games might have some socializing value, teaching poise under stress. However, the ability to remain poised does not mean never being embarrassed. It is important that one have the capacity of being embarrassed. It is a way of demonstrating that one is a moreal person, in a variety of ways. A simple example is modesty, which is often regarded as a virtue. (For example, my blushing last Valentine's Day when Doleta reported printing many copies of my electronic Valentine the year before. It might be nice to discover that a woman reacts that way, but one had better not gloat about it.)

6. There are fairly strong social pressures on us to be poised and tactful persons. We learn that it is bad to make scenes, to disrupt social interaction. We learn to exhibit self-respect and to respect the face of others in our social encounters with them.

But this is linked with a deep ambiguity about the morality of tact and poise. It is, in an important way, morally **superficial**. Self-respect and respect for others can lead us to neglect really serious moral concerns. After the service last Sunday Carl Thomson made that observation to me. He has learned to avoid discussing certain kinds of topics when conversing with acquaintances and relatives; it can produce harmony, but at the cost of allowing others to think we agree with their wrong ideas. I suppose the desire to avoid making a scene has led most of us to fail to express disagreement with others who make remarks that are racist, sexist, or homophobic.

Goffman recognized the superficiality of much that goes on in impression management and saving face. He could do this while recognizing the importance of the topic. On the frontspiece of **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life** he quoted the philosopher George Santayana about masks.

(Santayana quote here)

7. But, at the same time, the pervasiveness of our concerns about respect for others can be seen in a more profound moral light. In an early article on "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," Goffman made use of some of the ideas about religion expressed by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim a century ago. Durkheim advanced a theory of secularization which is, I think, still partly valid. He argued that religion permeated almost all aspects of primitive societies, while it has a much more restricted range in modern societies. However, primitive religions concerned only society as a whole, not the individual. Individual concerns were part of the profane, not the sacred. In modern societies, however, religions buttress individualism, so that now we can refer

to the "sacred individual." Goffman applied these ideas to everyday social life. He argued that everyday social life is governed by ceremonial rules as well as substantive rules. Ceremonial rules are rules about conduct in which people express their moral character and appreciate the moral character of those with whom they interact. Substantive rules have to do with the profane areas of life, where people are concerned with achieving ends that need have nothing to do with one another's moral character --- rules about not stealing, or driving on the right hand side of the road, or the standard operating procedures of a bureaucracy.

Goffman describes rituals of deference and demeanor in some detail. We defer to others, giving them respect, in avoidance rituals and presentational rituals; We respect the privacy of others, avoid drawing attention to their physical defects, and keep our physical distance from them. We defer to others in more positive ways by greetings, compliments, and providing minor services. We are expected to show self-respect in rituals of demeanor; these govern dress, deportment, and bearing.

People who conspicuously fail to properly demean themselves or show deference to others are likely to be defined as insane in our society. (People who violate substantive rules may be defined as criminal: there is quite a difference.) Goffman illustrates his points about deference and demeanor by his observations of behavior in St. Elizabeth's mental hospital. Patients do not properly demean themselves: they fart at the dinner table, drool, grab food, etc. And they don't show deference to others: at the trivial level, they're likely to make verbal comments about the doctor who cut himself shaving that morning, (or stare at the bald head of the visiting sociologist), or they ask questions regarded as too personal, or they stand too close to others when conversing with them. At the not so trivial level, they may do things like throwing feces at the hospital staff. These are profanations of ritual. Goffman asserts. If the individual personality is sacred in Durkheim's sense, then

profanations are to be expected, for every religious ceremony creates the possibility of a black mass.... The idiom by means of which modes of proper conduct are established necessarily creates ideally effective forms of desecration, for it is only in reference to specified proprieties that one can learn to appreciate what will be the worst possible forms of behavior.

Mental hospital patients can be expert in this respect.

Goffman concludes with a claim that deference and tact, demeanor and poise, might be more than superficialities, but rather more deeply religious.

(quote last paragraph)