

Everyday Rituals

In a vintage joke about psychiatrists, an analyst scrutinizes a colleague who has just wished him good morning and ponders, "Now what did he mean by that?"

To University of Pennsylvania Sociologist Erving Goffman, that hoary punch line is a legitimate scientific query. In fact, Goffman has been asking—and answering—just such questions for years. He believes that greetings and goodbyes, congratulations and condolences, along with the other little ceremonies of daily life, serve serious purposes: they grease the wheels of social intercourse and help each person to create an acceptable image of himself in the eye of his fellows.

That is the gist of Goffman's newest book, *Relations in Public* (Basic Books; \$7.95). Its subject is microsociology, or group behavior on a small scale—as when people pass each other on the street or wait together at supermarket checkout counters. Such encounters, says Goffman, frequently consist of rituals: either "supportive interchanges" like "Hello" or "remedial interchanges" like "Excuse me." In each case, one person provides "a sign of connectedness to another," while the other shows "that the message has been received, that the affirmed relationship actually exists as the performer implies, that the performer has worth as a person, and that the recipient has an appreciative, grateful nature."

Among the most common of such interchanges are "rituals of ratification" intended to assure someone whose status has changed that old relationships will continue as before. These include congratulations at marriage, commiseration at divorce and condolences at death. Similar "reassurance displays" are also made on less momentous occasions. A teen-ager's friends will overreact to her new shoes: "Oh, let's see them. Oh, they're *cute*." In conversation, a remark from a bore, no matter how stupefying, may force his companions "to give a sign that he is qualified to speak." A good thing too, says Goffman, for "without such mercies, unsatisfactory persons would bleed to death from the conversational savageries performed on them."

Enoch Arden. Goodbyes also spawn rites of support. Shallow shipboard friendships can safely end with promises to meet again; everyone knows the promises need not be kept. At farewell parties for friends moving to distant places, "high praise and substantial offerings can be accorded, since there will be no chance for this level of giving to be established as the norm."

Such parting rites have their dangers; they can become "spoiled rituals" if the departed guest comes back for

his forgotten umbrella, or if the transferred employee is reassigned to his old job. Then he and his well-wishers find they have participated "in an inappropriate statement, yet one that cannot be unsaid." The extreme example is "the Enoch Arden case in which a person returning unexpectedly finds not only that his place is no longer available to him, but that another person has filled it, thereby creating what may be worse than a sociological demise, namely, a sociological double."

In these cases, remedial interchanges are not of much use. But in less complicated situations they can help correct an impression of bad manners. A middle-class man who finds himself seated next to an "inferior" on a crowded bus "makes sure to present a bustling, purposeful air" when he gets off so that everyone understands he is no snob changing seats but just a man who has reached his destination.

There are other familiar examples of the nonverbal remedial ritual. To hide her embarrassment at having to go to the bathroom, a girl at a party sometimes uses broad swimming motions to cut her way through a knot of guests obstructing her route. In *Winnie-the-Pooh*, Piglet, out "hunting" with a friend, is startled by something innocuous and jumps involuntarily. To show he really isn't frightened he jumps up and down several more times in "an exercising sort of way."

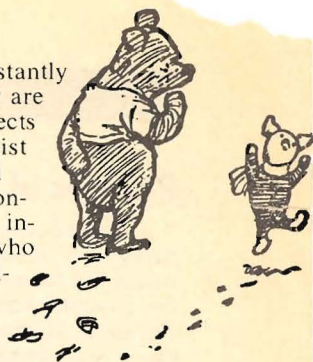
To readers of Goffman, such behavior often recalls Eric Berne's *Games People Play*. Berne's games, however, are part of a neurotic search for emotional involvement, while Goffman's rituals represent only a normal attempt to save face. Because of this concentration on image making, some of Goffman's critics find him trivial and limited. "People just do not go around with

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their attention constantly focused on how they are being regarded," objects Berkeley Sociologist Herbert Blumer. All the same, Blumer considers Goffman "an innovative scholar" who "can take human interplay which appears humdrum and show it to be intricate, dynamic and dramatic." Indeed, Goffman's work may be not so much social science as social commentary. In the words of one behavioral scientist, "Goffman is the waste of a good novelist."



Life Without the Tube

That addicts deprived of drugs suffer physical pain has been known for centuries. That human beings denied TV can experience psychological withdrawal symptoms has just been discovered. The finding was reported by the Society for Rational Psychology in Munich. Kicking TV cold turkey, says the German firm, can lead to moodiness, child spanking, wife beating, extramarital affairs and, at home, decreased interest in sex along with fewer orgasms.

The society asked 184 habitual viewers to renounce the tube for a year. At first they seemed happy to be free of it. They went to the movies three times as frequently as before, visited relatives and friends twice as often, and spent twice as much time reading and playing games. Before long, however, they felt a renewed urge to watch TV. Though the subjects were paid for every day of self-denial, one man resumed his habit after only three weeks. No one held out for more than five months.

What drove them back to the tube was mounting tension at work, at home and in bed. Quarreling and physical aggression increased. Before the sets were switched off, only 2% of the husbands had ever beaten their wives and only 58% of the parents had disciplined their children by slapping them. Afterward, however, the percentages rose to 5 and 66. With the TV on again, aggression decreased and sexual habits went back to normal—except that for a while, husbands and wives had a few more orgasms than they were used to and single people masturbated more than before.

None of this means that TV is either a tranquilizer or an aphrodisiac, cautions Psychologist Henner Ertel. In fact, the tube might well foster tension and dull sensuality in those who are unaccustomed to it. But among devotees, it may mask conflicts and even provide a last link between otherwise estranged couples. "With people who watch regularly," Ertel explains, "many behavior patterns become so closely related to TV that they are negatively influenced if one takes the set away. The problem is that of addiction."