When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. They will be interested in his general socio-economic status, his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence, his trustworthiness, etc. Although some of this information seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him. Informed in these ways, the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him.

For those present, many sources of information become accessible and many carriers (or “sign-vehicles”) become available for conveying this information. If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes to him. They can also assume from past experience that only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting. They can rely on what the individual says about himself or on documentary evidence he provides as to who and what he is. If they know, or know of, the individual by virtue of experience prior to the interaction, they can rely on assumptions as to the persistence and generality of psychological traits as a means of predicting his present and future behavior.

However, during the period in which the individual is in the immediate presence of the others, few events may occur which directly provide the others with the conclusive information they will need if they are to direct wisely their own activity. Many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it. For example, the “true” or “real” attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior. Similarly, if the individual offers the others a product or service, they will often find that during the interaction there will be no time and place immediately available for eating the pudding that the proof can be found in. They will be forced to accept some events as conventional or natural signs of something not directly available to the senses. In Ichheiser’s terms, the individual will have to act so that he intentionally or unintentionally expresses himself, and the others will in turn have to be impressed in some way by him.…

Taking communication in both its narrow and broad sense, one finds that when the individual is in the immediate presence of others, his activity will have a promissory character. The others are likely to find that they must accept the individual on faith, offering him a just return while he is present before them in exchange for something whose true value will not be established until after he has left their presence. (Of course, the others also live by inference in their dealings with the physical world, but it is only in the world of social interaction that the objects about which they make inferences will purposely facilitate and hinder this inferential process.) The security that they justifiably feel in making inferences about the individual will vary, of course, depending on such factors as the amount of information they already possess about him, but no amount of such past evidence can entirely obviate the necessity of acting on the basis of inferences. As William I. Thomas suggested:

It is also highly important for us to realize that we do not as a matter of fact lead our
lives, make our decisions, and reach our 
goals in everyday life either statistically 
or scientifically. We live by inference. I 
am, let us say, your guest. You do not 
know, you cannot determine scientifically, 
that I will not steal your money or your 
spoons. But inferentially I will not, and 
inferentially you have me as a guest.¹

Let us now turn from the others to the point 
of view of the individual who presents himself before 
them. He may wish them to think highly of him, or 
to think that he thinks highly of them, or to perceive 
how in fact he feels toward them, or to obtain no 
clear-cut impression; he may wish to ensure suffi-
cient harmony so that the interaction can be sus-
tained, or to defraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, 
antagonize, or insult them. Regardless of the partic-
ular objective which the individual has in mind and 
of his motive for having this objective, it will be in 
his interests to control the conduct of the others, 
especially their responsive treatment of him. This 
control is achieved largely by influencing the defi-
nition of the situation which the others come to for-
mulate, and he can influence this definition by 
expressing himself in such a way as to give them the 
kind of impression that will lead them to act volun-
tarily in accordance with his own plan. Thus, when 
an individual appears in the presence of others, 
there will usually be some reason for him to mobi-
lize his activity so that it will convey an impression 
to others which it is in his interests to convey. Since 
a girl’s dormitory mates will glean evidence of her 
popularity from the calls she receives on the phone, 
we can suspect that some girls will arrange for calls 
to be made, and Willard Waller’s finding can be 
anticipated:

It has been reported by many observers 
that a girl who is called to the telephone in 
the dormitories will often allow herself to 
be called several times, in order to give all 
the other girls ample opportunity to hear 
her paged.²

Of the two kinds of communication—express-
ions given and expressions given off—this report 
will be primarily concerned with the latter, with the 
more theatrical and contextual kind, the non-verbal, 
presumably unintentional kind, whether this com-
munication be purposely engineered or not. As an 
example of what we must try to examine, I would 
like to cite at length a novelistic incident in which 
Preedy, a vacationing Englishman, makes his first 
apearance on the beach of his summer hotel in 
Spain:

But in any case he took care to avoid 
catching anyone’s eye. First of all, he had 
to make it clear to those potential com-
panions of his holiday that they were of 
no concern to him whatsoever. He stared 
through them, round them, over them— 
eyes lost in space. The beach might have 
been empty. If by chance a ball was 
thrown his way, he looked surprised; then 
let a smile of amusement lighten his face 
(Kindly Preedy), looked round dazed to 
see that there were people on the beach, 
tossed it back with a smile to himself and 
not a smile at the people, and then 
resumed carelessly his nonchalant survey 
of space.

But it was time to institute a little parade, 
the parade of the Ideal Preedy. By devious 
handlings he gave any who wanted to 
look a chance to see the title of his book— 
a Spanish translation of Homer, classic 
thus, but not daring, cosmopolitan too— 
and then gathered together his beach-wrap 
and bag into a neat sand-resistant pile 
(Methodical and Sensible Preedy), roll 
slowly to stretch at ease his huge frame 
(Big-Cat Preedy), and tossed aside his 
sandals (Carefree Preedy, after all).

The marriage of Preedy and the sea! There 
were alternative rituals. The first involved 
the stroll that turns into a run and a dive 
straight into the water, thereafter smooth-
ing into a strong splashless crawl towards 
the horizon. But of course not really to the 
horizon. Quite suddenly he would turn on 
to his back and thrash great white splash-
es with his legs, somehow thus showing 
that he could have swum further had he 
wanted to, and then would stand up a 
quarter out of water for all to see who it 
was.

The alternative course was simpler, it 
avoided the cold-water shock and it
avoided the risk of appearing too high-spirited. The point was to appear to be so used to the sea, the Mediterranean, and this particular beach, that one might as well be in the sea as out of it. It involved a slow stroll down and into the edge of the water—not even noticing his toes were wet, land and water all the same to him—with his eyes up at the skygravity surveying portents, invisible to others, of the weather (Local Fisherman Preedy).  

The novelist means us to see that Preedy is improperly concerned with the extensive impressions he feels his sheer bodily action is giving off to those around him. We can malign Preedy further by assuming that he has acted merely in order to give a particular impression, that this is a false impression, and that the others present receive either no impression at all, or, worse still, the impression that Preedy is affectedly trying to cause them to receive this particular impression. But the important point for us here is that the kind of impression Preedy thinks he is making is in fact the kind of impression that others correctly and incorrectly glean from someone in their midst.

I have said that when an individual appears before others his actions will influence the definition of the situation which they come to have. Sometimes the individual will act in a thoroughly calculating manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status require this kind of expression and not because of any particular response (other than vague acceptance or approval) that is likely to be evoked from those impressed by the expression. Sometimes the traditions of an individual’s role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind and yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression. The others, in their turn, may be suitably impressed by the individual’s efforts to convey something, or may misunderstand the situation and come to conclusions that are warranted neither by the individual’s intent nor by the facts. In any case, in so far as the others act as if the individual had conveyed a particular impression, we may take a functional or pragmatic view and say that the individual has “effectively” projected a given definition of the situation and “effectively” fostered the understanding that a given state of affairs obtains.

There is one aspect of the others’ response that bears special comment here. Knowing that the individual is likely to present himself in a light that is favorable to him, the others may divide what they witness into two parts; a part that is relatively easy for the individual to manipulate at will, being chiefly his verbal assertions, and a part in regard to which he seems to have little concern or control, being chiefly derived from the expressions he gives off. The others may then use what are considered to be the un governable aspects of his expressive behavior as a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects. In this a fundamental asymmetry is demonstrated in the communication process, the individual presumably being aware of only one stream of his communication, the witnesses of this stream and one other. For example, in Shetland Isle one crofter’s wife, in serving native dishes to a visitor from the mainland of Britain, would listen with a polite smile to his polite claims of liking what he was eating; at the same time she would take note of the rapidity with which the visitor lifted his fork or spoon to his mouth, the eagerness with which he passed food into his mouth, and the gusto expressed in chewing the food, using these signs as a check on the stated feelings of the eater. The same woman, in order to discover what one acquaintance (A) “actually” thought of another acquaintance (B), would wait until B was in the presence of A but engaged in conversation with still another person (C). She would then covertly examine the facial expressions of A as he regarded B in conversation with C. Not being in conversation with B, and not being directly observed by him, A would sometimes relax usual constraints and tactful deceptions, and freely express what he was “actually” feeling about B. This Shetlander, in short, would observe the unobserved observer.

Now given the fact that others are likely to check up on the more controllable aspects of behavior by means of the less controllable, one can expect that sometimes the individual will try to exploit this very possibility, guiding the impression he makes through behavior felt to be reliably informing. For example, in gaining admission to a tight social circle, the participant observer may not only wear an accepting look while listening to an informant, but
may also be careful to wear the same look when observing the informant talking to others; observers of the observer will then not as easily discover where he actually stands. A specific illustration may be cited from Shetland Isle. When a neighbor dropped in to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door into the cottage. Since lack of physical obstructions outside the cottage and lack of light within it usually made it possible to observe the visitor unobserved as he approached the house, islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door. However, some visitors, in appreciating that this examination was occurring would blindly adopt a social face a long distance from the house, thus ensuring the projection of a constant image.

This kind of control upon the part of the individual reinstates the symmetry of the communication process, and sets the stage for a kind of information game—a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery. It should be added that since the others are likely to be relatively unsuspicious of the presumably unguided aspect of the individual’s conduct, he can gain much by controlling it. The others of course may sense that the individual is manipulating the presumably spontaneous aspects of his behavior, and seek in this very act of manipulation some shading of conduct that the individual has not managed to control. This again provides a check upon the individuals behavior, this time his presumably uncalculated behavior, thus re-establishing the asymmetry of the communication process. Here I would like only to add the suggestion that the arts of piercing an individual’s effort at calculated unintentionality seem better developed than our capacity to manipulate our own behavior, so that regardless of how many steps have occurred in the information game, the witness is likely to have the advantage over the actor, and the initial asymmetry of the communication process is likely to be retained.

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the several different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradiction will not occur. I do not mean that there will be the kind of consensus that arises when each individual present candidly expresses what he really feels and honestly agrees with the expressed feelings of the others present. This kind of harmony is an optimistic ideal and in any case not necessary for the smooth working of society. Rather, each participant is expected to suppress his immediate heartfelt feelings, conveying a view of the situation which he feels the others will be able to find at least temporarily acceptable. The maintenance of this surface of agreement, this veneer of consensus, is facilitated by each participant concealing his own wants behind statements which assert values to which everyone present feels obliged to give up service.

Given the fact that the individual effectively projects a definition of the situation when he enters the presence of others, we can assume that events may occur within the interaction which contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection. When these disruptive events occur, the interaction itself may come to a confused and embarrassed halt. Some of the assumptions upon which the responses of the participants had been predicated become untenable, and the participants find themselves lodged in an interaction for which the situation has been wrongly defined and is now no longer defined. At such moments the individual whose presentation has been discredited may feel ashamed while the others present may feel hostile, and all the participants may come to feel ill at ease, nonplussed, out of countenance, embarrassed, experiencing the kind of anomy that is generated when the minute social system of face-to-face interaction breaks down.

In stressing the fact that the initial definition of the situation projected by an individual tends to provide a plan for the co-operative activity that follows—in stressing this action point of view—we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character. It is this moral character of projections that will chiefly concern us in this report. Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought
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to have this claim honored by others and ought in fact to be what he claims he is. In consequence, when an individual projects a definition of the situation and thereby makes an implicit or explicit claim to be a person of a particular kind, he automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect. He also implicitly forgoes all claims to be things he does not appear to be9 and hence forgoes the treatment that would be appropriate for such individuals. The others find, then, that the individual has informed them as to what is and as to what they ought to see as the “is.”

To summarize, then, I assume that when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation.… The issues dealt with by stagecraft and stage management are sometimes trivial but they are quite general; they seem to occur everywhere in social life, providing a clear-cut dimension for formal sociological analysis.

Endnotes


5. The widely read and rather sound writings of Stephen Potter are concerned in part with signs that can be engineered to give a shrewd observer the apparently incidental cues he needs to discover concealed virtues the gamesman does not in fact possess.

6. This role of the witness in limiting what it is the individual can be has been stressed by Existentialists, who see it as a basic threat to individual freedom. See Sartre, J.-P. (1956). Being and nothingness. (H. E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Philosophical Library, 365 ff.