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INTIMACY AND OPENNESS: THE DIFFICULTIES OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING*

Inquiries into the development and stability of intimate relationships are pursued with one of two approaches. They are studied either by *consensus theories* as functions of the integration of roles, or by *conflict theories* which are primarily concerned with open communication. The integrations-paradigm may be challenged by an analysis of deviant behaviours and the functioning of "closed" families; conflict theories, on the other hand, do not reckon with the difficulties of open communication in long-term processes of intimate relations.

In this paper I attempt to outline a "*relational approach*" focussing on the issue of mutual understanding. The departure point of this approach is the thesis that the stability of relationships and the level of mutual understanding is correlative. The more informal relationships are and the more essential they are in the life of the participants, the truer the above is. The correlation is, perhaps, closest in modern families: it is here that the attained level of mutual understanding is most closely related to the development of the system of relationships as a whole. The majority of the examples given below refer to understanding among family members.

1. ASCRIPTION OF INTENTIONS AND UNDERSTANDING

Understanding among people is obviously a way of cognition different from, for example, the perception of a technical or mathematical problem. While these latter can be formulated in clear and correct statements, since they are only meaningful for "cognitive reason", mutual understanding is not simply a cognitive operation and its sphere of meaning is not in all cases obedient to the logical rules for the formation of judgements and reasoning.

* (Selection from a fairly comprehensive study discussing the social and historical issues of the system of relationships in modern families and the problems of the chances of mutual understanding among family members. The study is based on the research I have been pursuing since 1966 at the Department of Sociology at Eötvös Lorand University, Budapest, Hungary.)

The formation of meaning and understanding takes place in the process of interpersonal communication. It is attempted here to interpret this process broken down into its components (Garfinkel, 1972). For the sake of simplicity we have confined ourselves to giving only one dialogue and in turn disregard all complicating factors, which will be analysed later. The scene is a flat, at about 8 o'clock in the evening. The actors are the wife ("A") and the husband ("B"). He is sitting in the room, watching TV, she is standing in the kitchen at the cooker, calling in to her husband:

1. Dinner is ready.

The meaning of this statement is not necessarily identical for "A" and "B". Let us suppose for example that "A"'s idea is

2. I know you are hungry, we can sit down to eat.

Suppose, further, that the meaning of 1. for "B" is,

3. "A" does not want to bring the dinner in.

We assume there is a difference between 2. and 3. Though "A" did not say what "B" in 3. *ascribes* to her, she did not say the opposite either. Her statement could be interpreted in this way, for instance if "B" had previously seen or heard "A" starting to lay the table in the kitchen. Both 2. and 3. can certainly be perceived as two different meanings of 1. formulated by the participants *by anticipating the other party's expectations*. Let us suppose that "A" guessed that "B" was expecting a statement whose meaning was,

4. At last, we can eat.

Suppose further, that "B" thought

5. "A" thinks I want to have dinner in the living-room, „in-front-of-the TV", though she would like to eat in the kitchen, "free-from-TV" and talk to me while having dinner.

These series of anticipations and expectation-ascriptions can undoubtedly be carried further, since there are presumptions in both 4. and 5. ascribed to the other by "A" and "B", respectively. Is this so in all sorts of personal communication, or only where there are misunderstandings, conflicts and confused conversations? I cannot go deeper into this extremely sophisticated problem here; I only refer to the fact that the development of interpersonal relationships is impossible without the operation of *ascription*, i. e. an assumption of and reaction to the other party's intentions. The acquisition of this operation is one of the essential conditions in the biological organism's sociocultural development and his becoming a human individual: he must experience it on the part of others and be capable of practising it himself. The content of ascriptions in interpersonal communication may, according to the relative standard of understanding, in many cases be quite consonant, but this is, just like dissonance, the result of interpretational anticipations. *The theoretical and practical possibility of both the divergence and the harmony of meanings is created by a series of intention-ascriptive assumptions.*

The framework of the basic structure of the process consists, therefore, of the mutual anticipations of meanings in statements, gestures and other communicative

signals, the anticipations of these anticipations and their further anticipations, while all the participants include in their anticipations what they in this respect ascribe to the other party and what, according to their assumptions, the other party ascribes to them. If we defined mutual understanding as "the coincidence of ascriptions and motives" and took only this model into account, we might claim: mutual understanding is never possible, because it is not rendered possible theoretically by the infinite range of ascriptions and motives, designated as its conditions. In a sense I accept this claim. None of us is capable of entirely understanding another person, as there is no human being who would directly share another's motives, thoughts or feelings. This model, however, involves only the "basic framework" of the process of interpersonal communication, and, in order to be able to reveal the functioning of and barriers to mutual understanding, further factors in the process must also be involved in the analysis.

In terms of the idea of "open communication" we might, for example, refer to the *continuity* of dialogue. Family members can clarify their mutual expectations and demonstrate the fallacies of each other's anticipations, the mistaken or imprecise quality of ascriptions in this case only. Thus, the continuous nature of interpersonal communication can exert a corrective influence. I accept this possibility. Nevertheless, further theoretical difficulties are raised by the continuous nature of communication that takes place in relationships, and open communication, as a form, is in my opinion insufficient to eliminate these problems.

As is apparent from the above example, the varieties of meaning of a single statement refer to a multitude of preliminaries and a context with a rich world of meaning. Statements can directly follow upon each other, or can form parts of a dialogue, and so there is the theoretical possibility of correcting mistaken anticipations. The effective operation of such corrections can be shown in terms of the above example as follows. "A" explains that "B" ascribed to her a certain intention mistakenly (e. g.: "But I don't mind bringing your dinner in"), and "B" corrects his former assumption accordingly (e. g.: "I thought that..."). The precondition of this effective operation is, therefore, that *the intention-ascriptions of responses of a corrective intention should not run a course if their implication is just as divergent as in the case of the varieties of meaning in the "original" statements*. For when this latter case occurs, the task of correction has to be accomplished by the further process of communication. Then, however; it is not only the mistaken meanings ascribed to the "simple" statements, like those in our example, that must be corrected, but also the meanings of later explanations of an actual or supposedly corrective intention, too. Thus just as the varieties of meaning of the "original" statements emerged from a series of anticipations, the explanations of explanations called to correct these divergent varieties of meaning can form divergent series, too, and can hinder effective correction.

Thus, the process of interpersonal communication can make a corrective impact. But the same condition, the long series of preliminaries and the reliance on them may also lead to an increase in misunderstanding, as is observed in the course of

"explaining things away". The rest of the communicational factors of relationship-formation exert a similar influence. The motivations of family members may increase their chances of mutual understanding, but the gap between solicitude and jealousy is not very wide. Similarly, physical closeness and the richness of non-verbal communication may contribute to both the increase and the reduction of the chances of mutual understanding. And, finally, the effect of the parties' images of each other and mutual familiarity may be quite contradictory.

Family members endeavour to form a coherent and valid *image of each other* as their relationships develop. This image involves the other party's character, main features, roles, capacities, habits, tastes, indeed their whole personality. There are *three empirical sources* for these images formed of each other, though they change in time. The *first* – but *never exclusive* – source consists of those manifestations which our partner reveals in interaction with us. Included here is everything that the *second person* in his words, motions, sight or accent *says about himself*, about what has happened to him, what he has seen or heard, what he and his friend or colleague have done, what he was happy about and what he was compelled to do. These reports – proper accounts, casual remarks or non-verbal signals – are products of his selection. At the same time, we receive not only these selected accounts (related events, opinions, accents, motions etc), that our partner makes known to us, but also the modes of his selection as assumed by us. These, as the assumed motives of his behaviour are "included" in our image of him (e. g. his extra-family activities, roles etc). We must take into consideration that selection is an essential precondition of any communication (cf. Luhmann, 1975b). That is, the image we form of our partner is always more complicated than the one he is able to present of himself.

A further cause of this is that we ascribe a meaning to his actions and words not only on the basis of his own actions, but also make use of two other sources of information. The *second source is our own experience of him*, drawn from direct observation in situations where other people were also present. We have seen, heard and understood our partner while at work or among his friends and have experienced his treatment of others in our family or of relatives. The *third source* is constituted by colleagues, relatives and friends, i. e. *one or several "third parties"*, since we can rely on their casual remarks and voluntary reports as well. Thus it is possible to complete and control the information given by our partner about himself and the events in his life.

Frequently it seems as if "supervision" were the main function of these two latter sources, as when we consider our partner's statements incomplete or wilfully false or deceptive, and want to learn the "truth". In other cases we would only like to know more about him or about what happens to him, and therefore try to observe him directly or learn from the account of a "third party". From this "supervising", "completing", and "modifying" information, however, we always obtain more additional information than the factual content of the statements. For the great value of comparing the sources is that *we get a deeper insight into the partner's selection*, his "formations" and his "presentation of his self" (Goffman, 1976a), i. e. the forms in which

he himself tries to *define his communicational situation*. Thus we are able to control or complete not only him and his statements, but also *ourselves*, since we can confirm or modify our own concepts concerning the reasons for his behaviour.

Ali this is not, of course, a matter of determination, but the regular basic structure of the communicational process of relation-formation. The image "A" has of "B" and vice versa is always a common creation of them both. (Not only theirs indeed but that of several other "third parties" as well, but such complicating factors are disregarded for the time being.). During their cooperation "A" always knows more about his own activities and experiences, as they are always more complicated than those which he is able to report to "B". "B" however, perceives not only the subject of these reports, but also learns the "reporter's" methods of selection and interprets "A"'s reports according to his own conception of this selection – i. e. according to assumed motives of "A"'s behaviour. Consequently, *"B" always qualifies and interprets "A"'s reports und intentional signals, questions, opinions or requests in his own way, because he is able to see their "background" and interprets what results from the selection of 'A'.*

The interpersonal dynamic of this contradiction – and its effect in structuring all kinds of intimacy – stems from the fact that *every "A" knows this about every "B"*, and vice versa. That is why family members try to authenticate the rules of the selective demonstration of their outward activities and to direct and control the manner in which their partners utilize the two other sources (direct personal experience and the reports of a "third party").

Endeavours to authenticate the regularity of selectivity can be observed in many branches of the intimate sphere. The most characteristic and widely known are, perhaps, the attempts of spouses to convince each other of the reconcilability of their roles relating to sex within and outside marriage, the reliability of their intentions, their faithfulness, etc. With responses to the *jealousy* of his partner (prevention, open or skilfully covered refutations, counter-evidence, reassurances and other communicative tactics) the other party always wants to vindicate his reliability and, simultaneously, the methods of selection of his reports. Thus, he tries to authenticate the accepted motives of his behaviour.

There is, however, a further difficulty with mutual understanding based on explicit content that springs from the nature of interpersonal communication. This is caused by *the difference between the two "levels" of communication*, i. e. by the fact that communication and relation-formation always take place simultaneously on the level of the "object" and that of the "relation" (Watzlawik, et al. 1968). The "object-level" indicates what we are talking about, what our words and non-verbal signals refer to as an object, while we interpret the *social meaning* of our direct communication on the "relational level". Thus we recognise if our partner's words or motions advise or demand, hinder or encourage, whether he treats us as his equal or not, whether he is glad to see us or he is fed up with us, whether he is simply "saying something" or is explaining himself in embarrassment. In order to interpret another person's statement

on this level there is not always the need for a common language. Even a foreigner who cannot understand the language of a father scolding his child in the Street, can realize that what he is witnessing isn't a quarrel. To do this it is necessary to perceive above all the meaning of non-verbal signals, since these express the definition of the interpersonal situation and relationship on a "meta"-level. The common norms of a relationship are gradually built up through a series of metacommunicational reaction-definitions.

The two levels of communication roughly correspond to verbal and non-verbal channels: verbal statements are interpreted on the object-level, while non-verbal ones on the relational level. The relationship between levels and channels is, however, far more complicated than such generalities. First, there are communicational acts when only one of the channels is employed (when we use gestures, or communicate by letter with somebody), but even then, statements are interpreted and meaning is constructed on both levels. Secondly, family members frequently formulate some problem in their relationship, an instance of tension between them, some joy or sorrow, and make it the object of their verbal statements. Sometimes they try to discuss their relationship *as a whole*, its chances of survival, its present or future. Some of these formulations are revealing, highly significant confessions that can for a long period provide the basis of the relationship. We might ask, however, what the general effect exerted by explicit relation-definitions on relation-formation is. The answer is dependent on whether such explications – whose subject is the relationship itself – are not interpreted on two levels, as any statements, requests, or proposals on different subjects are.

In this way our enquiry into the possibility of *open communication* is answered on the basis of the above analysis of ascriptions and the "interpretative" nature of interpersonal communication. It is impossible that partners should not ascribe some intention to statements about their relationship, to the way they are received, to questions and answers on the meta-"relational level". The formulation and clarification of their intentions is, again, carried out on two levels of communication. *Our capacity to talk to each other about each other is, therefore, no guarantee of mutual understanding indeed it can even set further barriers to it.* For this reason I consider as limited the validity of the results of research that refers to manifest "relationship endeavours" and that of proposals which aim to increase the chance of the resolution of future conflicts by recourse to explicit and mutually accepted "rules of relationship" (Miller and Steinberg, 1975).

2. THE SYSTEM OF RELATIONSHIPS

In analyzing the functioning of interpersonal communication I worked with the assumption that in the construction of meaning "A" invariably interprets only "B"'s

behaviour. I disregarded the facts that no family consists of two members only, that the members usually belong to both sexes and at least two generations and that their family roles are determined by further important features. So far this abstraction has been necessary; from now on, however, a wider system of relationships must also be taken into consideration, since even the simplest acts of communication are determined by it. Ascriptions, anticipations and interpretations are always constructed by partners within a system in which they must also be considerate towards other persons – members either present or absent, but represented by the other party – and knowing that the other is also considerate toward these persons, they must anticipate each other's actions, etc.

"A" and "B" regularly mediate one or more members' requirements, interests, and expectations toward each other; they act on these mediations, expect them from the other party and anticipate the other party's attitude and reaction. Interpersonal mediations may develop into temporary or permanent roles played by the individual between two other persons, and coalitions may be formed – temporary or permanent, for or against the interests of a third member. This means that member "C" is usually "present" in the Communications of "A" and "B" somehow, *irrespective* of whether he is physically present and how far the actual communication is directly related to him. I am not claiming that "A" and "B" invariably communicate on behalf of "C" (expressing his interests and requirements) but that *their relationship is formed in the course of such mediations and reflections.*¹

A closely related system of relationships is also manifest in the motivations behind relation-formations. It is expressed in the fact that the members expect from each other a kind of reconciliation of the elements of their sets of roles, anticipate the roles played by the other party outside their actual interaction and take the predictable anticipations of the other party into account. Put in terms of role-relationships, the members of the couple are at the same time also children and/or parents, brothers or sisters, brothers/sisters-in-laws, sons/daughters-in-law, and they represent these roles in their marital relationship, too. Although they may express their opinions on this matter, they permanently endeavour to prevent such – affective and cognitive - dissonances and make their relationships as unified as possible. This is also necessary for them if they are to develop a common life together.

The way relationship between 2 members develops is dependent on how the understanding of a third member or others is added to their understanding of each other.

Generally we might claim that understanding between two (three, four, etc.) members can be established in a manner excluding other members. I do not claim that this latter case implies an understanding of identical nature and profoundness in

¹ Morgan (1975) claims that the fundamental units of families are, in reality, not couples, but triads, since the members have no fixed position in relation to each other. This is a new formulation of G. Simmel's idea (1968) about the different qualities of diads and triads.

all couple-relationships, but that it is not permanently directed against any other member. *I consider this, the lack of permanent discrimination, the most important criterion* in trying to interpret mutual understanding *in terms of a system of relationships as a whole.*

A system of relationships is, however, no stable configuration. The number of members, their composition, age, etc. changes with the passing of years. The significance of the *dimension of time* is perhaps most clearly revealed by the cumulative effects of unresolved conflicts between members. Relationships may be rearranged in each new period of life, in the course of which not only does resolution of previous conflicts become more and more difficult, but it may also lead to the emergence of even less resolvable ones. Therefore, it is to be expected that the subject, timing, manner and treatment will be *different* where the members have for a long period been able to understand each other from a situation in which they have not. In all events, I consider the functioning of mutual understanding a *continual process* that governs the members' system of relationships for a relatively long period.

On this point some of the important features of the phenomenon can be summarized. Mutual understanding is not a state attainable and warrantable once and for all, but an *interpersonal performance* established by family members continuously through their cooperation and conflicts;

- it can be interpreted in terms of the system of relationships as a whole, when none of the members is permanently "*excluded*";
- it is a *process* whose level may increase or decrease in time;
- its achieved level *determines the nature of conflicts* and the chances and manner of their solution.

The closely related system of relationships and its development over time must be taken as decisive theoretical viewpoints in the analysis of the communicative problems of mutual understanding. But in considering the problems, especially differences in the series of meanings emerging from interpretative ascriptions, it is clear why the need to consider these viewpoints leads to further confusion.

Let us briefly return to the example used to demonstrate the structure of the interpersonal communicative process. I analyzed a single statement of a single dialogue – "Dinner is ready" – and indicated the situation by the actors' roles as spouses, their position in space and their actions. Thus, in order to make my ideas explicit, I disregarded a number of factors which are indispensable for the interpretation of the chances and level of mutual understanding when a family is at issue. What was disregarded were primarily the actual elements in the varieties of meaning in the statement: oral preliminaries, the formation of the situation, other members of the family, and so on. In other words the aspects we take into account in the context of interpersonal communication and which define the normative level of understanding.

3. NORMATIVE LEVELS OF MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING

a. Role relationships in formal situations

We are involved in more or less formal and temporary interactions of a definite function on innumerable occasions in our everyday life. When, for instance, on entering a restaurant we see that the waiter we have never met before is polite and considerate to us, we suppose we understand his behaviour and reasonably think he also knows what we expect from him. He would, for example, quite probably behave in a different manner, should we arrive in rags, or were beggars, gipsies, black, drunk, etc. Due to our stereotypical knowledge, we possess some interpretative patterns that make us able to understand each other. This is, naturally, only a possibility, but this chain of ideas requires no more than a theoretical possibility. What is decisive is that the perfection or lack of understanding or partial understanding in various relationships and its superficiality or profoundness must be judged relatively, i. e. *according to the standard set by those involved in the relationship*. Even a formal and occasional communication between two strangers has a desirable "standard of understanding" (different in each situation and relationship), according to which their interaction is judged to be entirely or partially successful. The more colourful and varied the past interaction is and the more particular their mutual intentions and anticipated reflexion are, the higher the standard is. The wish for intimate contact also requires such a standard; the wish to have some insight into as many of the other party's motives as possible, to perceive the hidden indications of his needs, and to be allowed to expect the same from him.

Thus, further questions are raised by the level or standard of mutual understanding. The higher this standard is, the more complex the conditions of understanding and the greater the pressure toward the indication and anticipation of mutual expectations and the manifestations of these. The relativity of standards and their achieved success or failure must be analyzed by simultaneously focussing on both these viewpoints – the possible and the desirable standard of understanding. The above example may contribute to achieving this. The possibility of understanding between the waiter and the guest springs from the fact that they both follow conventions for which they personally are hardly responsible. *Any possible and desirable understanding between them at a low level can only be established because they give up their own norms and expectations*, so the context of their communication consists of simple, functionally explicit items.

b. Informal relationship contexts

The more numerous the particular expectations and their anticipations and manifestations allowed by a given relationship are – i. e. the more complex the context of communication is –, the higher the level of understanding. But the higher this level is, the

more responsible the participants are – and the more responsible they consider each other – for the context established by them. This is inevitable, since they themselves have made each other accept their personal norms for the very reason that it was desirable for them to know and understand intimately the motives for each other's behaviour and statements. The outcome of the process is *a joint effect of their interpersonal past, expressed in the richness and complexity of their contexts*. There is no such complexity of context in cursory, "inter-role" relationships, and the participants do not need it either. Attempts at it are taken as "over-familiar", and might disturb ordinary interaction. On the other hand, the more personal a relationship is, the richer the contexts of the participants' Communications are.

This is experienced by anybody arriving as a stranger at a new place of work or some other informal group and striving to understand the communication and the references of the participants. Naturally, he can, at a certain level, "understand" every word and phrase – being in possession of the codes of the mother tongue and certain sociocultural codes -, but without understanding hidden references he cannot grasp the interpersonal meaning of the communication as he lacks the codes of the interpersonal context.²

There are a number of different approaches to this phenomenon in modern linguistics. Particular emphasis has been placed on the study of the various semantic preassumptions of the truth value of presuppositions, inspirations and hints. The point is, therefore, that verbal manifestations always contain "fixed information", a familiarity which is indispensable in understanding, anticipating and following the speech-act. One of the components of the complexity of informal contexts is, therefore, that *particular personal expectations and their anticipation become pieces of "fixed information"*, subjects of references well understood by all the participants - since they have been created and tacitly accepted by them -, which outsiders and strangers, however, cannot properly comprehend. *The more numerous and various the pieces of "fixed information" contained by a discourse, the more complex the context.*

c. Intimate relationship contexts

The richness of context characterizes all permanent interpersonal relationships, but not, of course, to the same extent. There are stable groups where the interpersonal past and context of the members' cooperation is more or less rich, but their relationship is, nevertheless, not intimate. For in order to designate a relationship or

² What the sociocultural codes used by the stranger and the community he enters are, is quite a different question. In all events, in order to be communicatively as well as linguistically competent among the members of the group, he will need both systems of codes – the sociocultural and the interpersonal-informal one. On the notion of "Communicative competence" see Hymes, 1971.

system of relationships as "intimate" it is necessary that the members should, on the one hand, facilitate, and on the other hand desire, the highly intensive exploitation of the context in their Communications. When this is not rendered possible and desirable in their mutual expectations and anticipations, their relationship may be informal, more or less rich in context and either good or bad, but it cannot become intimate. This characterizes one's relatively loose relationships with schoolmates or colleagues, and, in most cases, with neighbours. Close friendship implies that the relationship context can and must be exploited more intensively than in the above cases. And, since this is not a single act of communication, the indications and manifestations of familiar references make further intensive exploitation possible and desirable. Thus, the intimate nature of the most personal relationships is composed, from the extraordinary complexity of the context, and from the fact that it creates the possibility of and motivations for a highly intensive formation and exploitation of this context.

The possible and desirable standard of mutual understanding is, therefore, dependent on the complexity of the relationship context through the extent to which exploitation is possible and necessary. "Intimate understanding" constitutes the highest of standards, as it means that *the participants may, but also at the same time must, endeavour to attain each other's most personal understanding*. This kind of "free compulsion" is highly ambivalent, as expressed in the uncertainties and ambiguities in any consensus concerning the ethical values of family life – mutual love, intimacy, devotion and, naturally, understanding; in our laughing at the comedians' "standard families" and in our being overwhelmed by the fate of children in state care or by the family tragedies of others; it is thus expressed both in a striving for such values and a scepticism concerning them.

4. THE STRUCTURE OF INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP CONTEXTS

In order that families can perform their functions it is necessary for the members to engage in regular cooperation. The question concerning the rules of cooperation is what is dependent on who, when, where, how etc, in performing a certain activity, e. g. a routine household task.³ The possible answers to such questions – or the answers to further questions raised by these answers – refer to the family members' influence upon each other. The total of these I call "interpersonal relations of competence" and argue that *these relations in all families form contexts which are implicitly*

³ The issue of relationship rules and their classification through a similar approach, though with therapeutic purposes, is discussed by Haley (1963).

included by the members in the coordination of their activities and tasks. In the course of the formation and exploitation of the context the members refer not only to their interpersonal relations of competence. There are also other sorts of relational connexions, and even structural phenomena like coalitions of family members and their mediating roles, which have a context-forming significance. These connexions and structural configurations cannot be studied here. I would only emphasize that the *intimate interpersonal context is primarily dependent on these implied connexions, rather than on the situation's contents of general and conventional meaning interpreted in role-categories.*

It is therefore necessary to focus our attention on implied relational connexions and structures. It must be realized that *contexts are neither self-sufficient and ultimate frameworks, nor freely alterable viewpoints.* It is we who formulate and exploit the references; the more active our participation in this process is and the more specific the expectations we manifest and anticipate, the more we are responsible for the connexions we must imply in them. I am in full agreement with E. Goffman who considers it insufficient to treat context as a "residual category", something undifferentiated and global which must be referred to when – and only when – we have to explain the perceptible difference between what was actually said and what was intended. This tactic excludes the realization of the fact that when such a difference is not perceptible, the significance of the context is, nevertheless, still decisive - although it is in practice the usual context of the given manifestation (Goffman, 1976b, 307). It is just the symbolic medium formed and exploited in the relationship in a routine manner that deserves the keenest interest.

The implicative formation of the relationship context creates tacit standards, or "working-consensuses". Goffman (1976a) created the notion of "working-consensus" in the analysis of "impression-making" and used it to designate the most important condition of the "modus vivendi" of the developing interaction. The meaning of this concept was extended by Lauer-Handel (1977): "The working-consensus points beyond the limits of the partial interaction where it develops. It also determines those activities of the participants which take place outside, but are related to the interaction at issue defining their relationship" (p. 121.). They regulate the family members' routine context-definitions, the manner of their cooperation and the mutual manifestations and anticipations of their expectations. Due to their tacit nature, the standards are usually self-evident and often seem to be natural. Members exploit them as conditions of their intercourse and cooperation that "are simply so". This is indispensable for the ordinary course of family life and the normal functioning of the organization of communication. Should all the members endeavour ceaselessly to clear up the justifiability, source and bearings of the other party's intentions, requests or requirements, even the simplest cooperation would be interrupted; "life would come to a stop". These self-evident consensuses may also develop in family customs, traditions and rites that warrant the obviousness of meaning. Hence the difficulty of knowing the interpersonal genesis or "making" of contexts which have taken root in

custom and are, therefore, resistant. This is why the modes of its formation and exploitation remain hidden. *What is self-evident cannot be challenged* – and, therefore, cannot even be known – until someone breaks the consensus, or some new circumstance, a sudden change or an extrinsic expectation shakes its self-evident nature. This is shown below in an example relating to the habitual arrangement of seats. The members of the family: Istvan Morvai Sr., 58, unskilled labourer; Terez K., his wife, 52, collective farmer; and their son, Istvan M. Jr. (Pista), 31, commercial clerk. The scene: a room at home, a weekday evening; apart from the researcher, only Istvan M. Jr. and his mother were at home. Extract from the researcher's record (Somlai, 1978a);

"We went from the kitchen into the room to watch the return of the Hungarian crown. I sat apart in a corner, letting Terez sit on the best armchair in the middle. When his son entered, she leapt up and Pista took this comfortable seat."

It might become clear from the report why this arrangement of seats is "self-evident" at the Morvais'. The comfortable seat is given up on each occasion by Terez to her husband, or son, while she usually retires. They had all taken this for granted, but the self-evident nature of this habit was this time shaken by the presence of the female researcher:

"Pista sat for a minute, then he stood up and offered the seat to me, but I declined it."

Pista stood up because he followed the rule of "guests first" or that of "ladies first". He may have anticipated the expectation of these rules on the part of the researcher and with this gesture, on the one hand he manifested this anticipation, and on the other hand expressed the possibility that the usual arrangement of seats in such situations can be altered, thus raising the rules expected by the researcher to dominance. He was then convinced that his assumption had been false as his gesture was acknowledged, but rejected.

"He sat down again, but a moment later leapt up for the second time, trying to offer his place to his mother, who began to make excuses. Only then did Pista realize the possible reason for the falsity of his assumption. He recognized "a bit too late" that the researcher had an expectation relating to a rule different from their customary arrangement of seats, whose validity excludes or at least precedes that of the rules which he had previously falsely assumed. His second gesture followed this correct assumption. The excuses of his mother Terez, however, manifested that "*this is simply so*", and it cannot be otherwise.

It is not claimed here that this realization was shocking for the members of the Morvai family. Perhaps they reconsidered their arrangement of seats in front of the TV and realised that it was not self-evident, it could be otherwise and it was not natural for other people. There are much more shocking realizations in the lives of families than this; in a foreign environment, on special occasions or in a new relationship, spouses, parents or children suddenly realise that "*it can be otherwise*". At a

turning-point in their lives – on leaving school, after moving together or apart, following the birth of children or their reaching adulthood, in the course of a long disease or on reaching retirement – they may "all of a sudden" realize what the common and taken for granted conditions of their lives have been so far. It may even happen that the context of their relationships, the "sense" of routines and tacit consensuses and their hidden interpersonal connexions have light thrown on them by a sudden and accidental event at the height of a period of their lives, after the accumulation of various effects and experiences (Berger-Kellner, 1973).

Thus, the implications of tacit consensuses must not be mistaken for the problem of the customs and traditions of families. The issue of the implicative formation and exploitation of contexts points beyond the inert power of customs. Being regularly together undoubtedly leads to the development of such stabilized modes of behaviour and communication frameworks everywhere. But, firstly, not all tacit consensuses are rooted in custom, and, secondly, *it is the relational references of the implied evidences, rather than the stabilized form, that is relevant* from the view-point of context formation. (For the differences between customs, habits or practices and implied rules see Ganz, 1971). But why is it less difficult to overcome open misunderstandings than tacit consensuses? Whence the difficulty in the coherent expounding of these self-evident standards?

Innumerable variations of cooperation, activity or interpretation are created in families, and, as has been indicated, they are not fully stabilized in customs or clearly definable rules. Families do, however, somehow regulate to whom the members should turn and over what matters; what is acceptable and from whom; what is considered an insult and what a joke; how loudly they talk to each other; what order and tidiness mean in the fiat; when physical closeness is allowed or desirable among each other and to what extent, etc. Although some of these standards may be corollaries of customs, they do not refer to them. It can, for instance, be precisely formulated and easily prescribed for children on what occasions and with what words they should congratulate their grandparents or relatives. The ritual of habits can, therefore, be more or less precisely circumscribed, and the greater the behaviour connected to the ritual, the more accurately they can be taught. What the children must not request, ask or do before, during or after the celebration cannot, however, be dictated in advance. This must be learnt, and afterwards "known" by them – but they cannot learn and know it from clearly expressed rules relating to customs. Parents may, for example, clearly stipulate that their child should write them letters while on holiday with relatives. They may even specify the exact number and extent of the letters they expect or designate some of the subjects the child must write about. But they cannot make specific requirements about everything the letters should include. Thus *it is impossible to provide an algorithmic series of instructions for accounts whose subjects is also dependent on, and partly is itself, what its author experiences.*

This can be demonstrated even more positively in the contexts of sexual life. Here, too, standards of activities and communication and behaviour patterns are formed that regulate the partners' conduct. Several of these patterns have been studied and compared by sexologists. I acknowledge that most standards – or even all of them – may be the subject of a dialogue of the sexual partners and that they can regulate and control their mutual behaviour with these explicit standards. I also acknowledge that in some sexual relationships such open and sincere dialogue may have a liberating power. But I cannot accept the theoretical possibility that all the aspects of sexual behaviour that are important for the members are regulated in this way. This would lead to the elimination of *spontaneity*, one of the most important sources of motivation in sexual relationships.

Spontaneity and flexibility are, therefore, structural features of the relationship context of informal Communications (Cicourel, 1972). Is there no contradiction between this and the feature analysed above, the self-evident nature of practices and tacit consensuses? I argue there is, but it is just this contradiction that expresses the "wrong alternatives" of the relationship contexts. When the flexibility of the context is – for a relatively long time or permanently – eliminated the relationship of the participants becomes impersonal. In such a case, they must be satisfied with the anticipation, indication and cognizance of the stabilized expectations, there is no way to alter them and every question and answer can be known in advance. Because of this, the members cannot express their individuality by indicating their particular requirements – by "keeping off" their roles. When, however, the context has become completely flexible and vague, when the self-evident standards can no more be relied on, the participants are unable to adjust themselves to each other. In this case, it can never be known what is to follow and what can be expected of the other party and in the absence of these, attempts to develop the "modus vivendi" of the relationships are doomed to failure. *Mutual understanding can in neither case be established.*

These extreme formulations were not meant to express the empirical modes of the formation of contexts. Most family behaviour can hardly be empirically classified into these two extremes. They might, however, possess a theoretical value, namely, that having recourse to them we can understand the *permanent necessity of balance* and the difficulty in articulating interpretative standards more exactly.

It frequently happens that a family member exploits several contradictory or different implications, but his partner still understands him without having to clear up the references that are *logically contradictory, but mentally reconcilable*. *The simultaneous permanence and flexibility of the context usually provides a broader or narrower playground than is indeed needed by the partners.*

The above attempts to authenticate and control perceptions and all sorts of *communicative tactics* are pursued in this playground. There are some tactical operations – blackmail, deceit, delusion, false promises, bribery – that we consider dishonest and condemn. But the relational implications of the context decide whether a certain act of communication represents manoeuvring (scheming or intriguing) or tactical

(clever and skillful) behaviour. Hardly anybody is reproached because of tactfulness discipline or discretion, although these are tactics as well. It is always dependent on the actual context whether in the course of a fierce conflict silence on one of the partner's sides is qualified as shiftiness, reserved admission, careful lack of expression or firm resolution and whether his passivity is considered as a sign of his readiness to cooperation ("I am listening to you") or an expression of disinterestedness.

Obviously there are deceptive tricks and traps even among friends and family members, but these are probably only the most salient – because theoretically facilitating exposure and the precise discovery of the real intention – varieties of tactics applied in the course of the formation of contexts. There is already an abundant literature on less conspicuous communicative methods at our disposal (Miller, 1976), but their more profound knowledge and conceptualization still requires, I think, much theoretical work and empirical study where the sociological, linguistic, semiotic and psychological viewpoints may be explicitly confronted. I enumerate below, therefore, only some examples of the types of these tactics. (They are not, of course mutually exclusive and their order constitutes no system.)

- the choice of the *site* of the communication (c. g. a quarrel is brewing between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law; each wants to conduct it in her own fiat);
- the exploitation of advantage stemming from the *arrangement of seats or situation* at a given site (by the regulation of distance, seating etc);
- *the involvement of another person or persons* as allies, witnesses or judges;
- *the establishment of ad hoc rules of metacommunication* (e. g. for the duration: "I have only ten minutes" or the subject of the quarrel: "Lets only talk about...");
- *the choice of loudness or the rhythm of speech*; its direction, increase or reduction verbally or non-verbally; *the non-verbal demonstration of attentiveness or indifference* (with look or posture);
- *the usage of a distinct language* so that a third person should not understand it ("Nicht vor den Kindern!");
- *the use of analogies, metaphors, generalities*;
- *non-verbal and tactile methods* (weeping, smiling, laughing, caressing, etc.) in order to elicit attention, admission, approval or support.

These and similar tactics may be exploited in different communicative strategies. The purposes of making someone laugh, the admission of a mistake, the justification of an action, explication, persuasion or intimidation might be varied (Jefferson, 1979; Schönbach, 1980). Strategies and tactics must, however, always be interpreted from the viewpoint of the formation and exploitation of the actual relationship context. Let us consider an example. The essence of the tactics of "prevention" (Hewitt and Stokes, 1975) is that the speaker tries to assure himself against possible counter-arguments or ascriptions. For instance: "I might be silly, but..." The success of this tactic is dependent on a number of factors, primarily on the partner's qualification of the intention of prevention, which is in turn dependent on the level of understanding, and on the profound and permanent relational connections of the current conversation's context.

The area of operation of the tactics and strategies of communication is also provided by the interpretative standards of the context. This playground is developed in all interpersonal Communications, and all partners try to exploit it according to their own requirements. Psychology and psychiatry have focussed on pathogenous games and strategies; psychotherapy also considers its main function to help the needy to orientation, control and sufficient practice in the exploitation of this playground. This may be of particular importance not only in marital and sexual advice, and family therapy, but also in advice on education.

It is rendered unnecessary by mutual understanding that partners should clear up what is self-evident. A permanent lack of understanding necessitates this, but this necessity in itself imposes considerable restraints on the possibility of a satisfactory solution. On the basis of what has been said the significance of this connection for the family members' formation of relationships is realizable. For *explication* may not only lead to the formulation of a hitherto hidden and vague reference, but also to a more or less profound, perhaps decisive *transformation of the structural basis of the context and the relationship as a whole*. When the implications of tacit standards - flexibly pliable so far - suddenly become definite and prove to be expressly right or false, *the context as a whole may be transformed through the utterance*, as the overtly known connections are necessarily replaced by new references that already refer to this overt knowledge or the intention of utterance.

The more the statement of facts, decisions or plans, felt as important, upset and renew the existing structure of the relationship context, the more difficult it is and the more emotional energy it entails. But it is never the "mere topics" - the choice of a partner, the intention of moving away from home or some actual event - that the extraordinary emotions drive from; they are caused by *the effects* that can be *expected in the context*. (This is why strangers often cannot understand the causes of a conflict and are unable to experience the anticipated situation - they have no sufficient knowledge of the system of connections where the topic, in their eyes harmless, can be expected to cause an explosion.)

This applies primarily to the formulation, reception, anticipations and reactions to announcements meant to be vital. "Open communication" must not, however, be exclusively regarded as a sudden expounding, a passionate statement and reaction of hitherto disguised or obscured actions, intentions and decisions. We must realize in these situations the manifestations of the demand for a *radical change of context*, the starting of a "blank sheet", or a continual "throwing the cards on the table". It is also possible - and often necessary - to speak frankly with a less radical purpose. For instance, among our fears in private life or at work, during a period of tension or after a failure, we may be persuaded by the intention to reveal ourselves or by the demand for the other party's sympathy to their open avowal. Dialogues, about doubts concerning emotions and will may be even more important and powerful in effect, since they may reveal the deeply particular aspects of the uncertainty of intentions that belong to the substance of personality. For such open dialogues are not only helpful in throwing light on the doubts at issue and in actual decisions but may exert a series of

additional effects: the members' images of each other and the modes of selection of each other's statements may be improved; their relationship context may be enriched with further implications; the other party's capacity for empathy may widen their mutual understanding and the experience of this may imbue with positive emotions their relationship as a whole.

It may be claimed as a conclusion that the formation and liberating effect of open communication is dependent on conditions stemming from the durable structures of intimate relationship contexts. Thus the chances of mutual understanding are ultimately dependent on these structures and the contexts defined by them.

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