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THE RITUALIZED COMMUNICATION IN SOCIAL RESEARCH ACTS

The most commonly accepted view of what ritual is refers this concept to repetitive, prescribed symbolic actions addressed to a sacred object (see, e.g. D o u g l a s, 1966, p. 66). Ritual is said to constitute a unified whole, in which all its relevant coordinates such as time, place, gestural and verbal performances, arrangements of their succession in time, etc., are submitted to strict rules that leave no freedom to participants with regard to their modes of behaviour. A deviation from any rule makes the ceremony invalid and means blasphemy. However, many anthropologists agree that the notion of ritual (may be used in relation to any "fixed set of solemn observances" L o w i e, 1974, p. 316), whenever they serve affirmative celebrations of values that are integratively important for a given group (see also L e a c h, 1954; T a y l o r, 1959; V. W. T u r n e r, 1969; H a m m o n d, 1972). It is a very significant concession. It allows to apply the concept of ritual to a much broader domain of actions, i.e. to all manifestations of the symbolic expression and control of social order. Yet, it continues to imply a limitation in the scope of the term, forcing us to classify such actions as completed rituals or non-rituals.

Other students tend to be more concessive. They propose to define ritual not in terms of completed ceremony, or a definite type of action, but as a communicative aspect of actions of almost any kind (L e a c h, 1964, p. 10-16); cf. M a n r o, 1968, p. 148). This idea comes very close to Goffman's conceptions of the affirmative

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(protective) repairing regulations that operate in everyday interaction. Thus understood, in some of Goffman’s work the notion of ritual is one of the main metaphors of social order (1971, 1972, 1975).

The advantage of such a conception is that we can see how actions may be ritualized, or how interactions display the tendency towards the ritualization of their conduct.

The concept of ceremony presupposes, to use B. Bernstein’s terms, a relatively strong classification and framing of communicative context in which a course of actions is to be recognized and realized in accord with strict rules (see Bernstein, 1980). The classifications and framings, perhaps with exception of those concerning magic or religious rituals may be, however, of gradual character. In modern societies there are numerous ceremonies in which: 1) some dimensions of communicative conduct come under prescriptive rules, but some do not, 2) some performative prescriptions are rigidly detailed, whereas others are only general and allow aleatory conduct, 3) the very conditions for the commencement of a ceremony may be predefined or left to the decision of its would-be participants. Thus, it suggests that we should rather use the notion of ritual as an ideal-typical concept, and not as a simple classificatory one. It may probably be suggested that the strictness of ceremonial rules is, among others, an outgrowth of the kind and scope of social bonds that are expressed, controlled by, and revitalized in a given ritual. It seems to increase as we go along the scale of social bond from immediate identifications and experiences towards those forms of sociality which are based on apersonal typifications. Or, when we move from the forms of social relationship in which personal faces are at stake towards those in which important group symbols, the symbols of group identity, are celebrated.

The term “ritualization” as opposed to “ritual” may suggest two meanings. It may mean a process, by virtue of and in which some practices gain the properties of a ceremony. On the other hand, it may also be referred to such-occasions, when some established behavioural routines of ritual value in their proper ceremonial context, are used by interactants in order to solve some practical instrumental problems, to control, redefine, or steer (in the strategic sense) their situations. It does not mean that
they are engaged in a ceremony. They rather try to adjust themselves to alleged demands of a situation, or to adjust the situation to their own definitions of what is going on, or to their purposes and expectations.

A few illustrating examples may be useful. Suppose, that a father is expected by his neighbours to punish his son for a mischief, but he does not really think the affair is serious enough to require real punishment. To satisfy the neighbours, the father makes a typical scene of calling the son to order. All the people, including the rebuked son, may be aware that the admonition of the boy is only a confirmation of the sense of pedagogical practices, and that the stern face, words and gestures of the father are not to display that he is enraged, but that he knows what it means to be a responsible father. Or, suppose that a couple gets involved in a serious quarrel, and one of the partners tries to transform the clash into a kind of funny game in which the rough words and gestures are to be understood as harmless teasing of one another. In both cases the participants may derive their lines of behaviour from some established patterns such as customs, ceremonies or manners recognised as typical in a given situation.

Thus understood ritualisation seems to be universal as a contingent tendency that may occur in any course of everyday interaction. The special attention which we pay to its manifestations in research act situations is justified by their importance as a methodological problem concerning the validity of studies based on communication techniques. Except for those techniques which contain entirely standardized possibilities of the choice of answer and do not require any additional speech production on the part of informants in all other modalities of sociological investigation based on talking the ritualization is likely to occur, especially when the respondents' beliefs and opinions are the subject of study.

It often happens to the sociologist when he asks people to formulate their beliefs that they do it in a way which allows the researcher to suppose that they do not express their personal views, but merely retail some ready-made catchwords, clichés and platitudes. He may only have an intuitive knowledge that they are likely to cover their genuine judgements, or try to mask the fact that they have nothing interesting to say, or that they feel they ought to speak in such way because the situation requires them to do so.
They may thus be said to ritualize their verbal interaction with the researcher by displaying the tendency to use a strongly conventionalized vocabulary, utterances and stylistic patterns recognizable as taken from an other communicative context.

The ritualization may occur here as a solution of some troublesome interaction, when a person is morally or institutionally obliged, or feels he is obliged, to answer some questions that he would not want to answer, or to talk to somebody whom he would not want to talk to, and he is not interested in revealing his opinions. In particular, the person may suspect that his expressions will not be taken at their face value and can serve as indicators of his unarticulated attitudes, beliefs, etc., though he does not control the rules and purposes of diagnosing and does not want to be tested. He may also suspect that any formulation of his true views could prove somehow dangerous for him, e.g. by placing him in a difficult, uncomfortable position in relation to the interviewer or to other persons, if some information happened to get outside. Such cases have much in common with strategic interaction as described by Goffman (1969).

The ritualization may be seen here a controlling or covering move in interaction, i.e., "an intentional effort of an informant to produce expressions that he thinks will improve his situations if they are gleaned by the observer" (Goffman, 1969, p.15).

There are, by and large, two sets of regulative principles that seem to account for the tendency towards the ritualization of communicative conduct on the part of informants, when they are not interested in talking, yet feel they have reasons to talk. One is the norm of politeness. The other refers to much more complex problems, connected with what could be considered as a measure of acculturation to sociology. People identify sociology in terms of its cross-institutional dependencies, social usefulness and trustworthiness. When the sociologist is defined by his potential informants as an agent or functionary of an institution which is dependent on, or subserving some larger institutional network, e.g., the state bureaucracy, it may happen that the informants will not refuse to talk with the researcher in order to avoid the possible consequences of refusal. Nevertheless they will be prone to adopt ritualized speech patterns safeguarding them against possible uncovering moves. The situation resembles in many ways the training
in total institutions, when a person is demanded to acquire a re-
stricted and sharply confined repertoire so that he would be ready
to react in ways appropriate for the given institution. It may
lead to the situation in which some informants assume that the
researcher expects them primarily to supply a mere affirmation of
the normative perspectives that they think they are expected to
share. In this sense, the ritualization might be accounted for al-
so by means of the sociocentric cognitive-communicative orienta-
tion embedded in the restricted code (see Berstein, 1975).

However, the notion of the restricted code would have to be
extended to spheres of discourse organization far beyond those
which operate within a social class category. A remark by Zna-
ni e o k i (1952, p. 255) on properties of some sociological te-
chniques of research is worth quoting here: "some questionnaires
are modelled [...] on the examination question asked by educators
(in the most general sense of the term) in order to ascertain whet-
her educands have learned what they were taught about the right
ways of acting in definite situations. When an educator asks how
a certain problem should be solved he does not imply any uncerta-
inty; he is absolutely certain what the right solution is, and the
educands know that he is". From my own research practice I can
quote an example that fully confirms the observation by Znaniecki.
A young girl was asked to interpret a short poem. At the beginning
of her answer she was not able to cope with the task, but she
quickly came to use standard pompous formulations known to her
from school contexts. They could fit any kind of poetry, but had
no informative value as to her personal understanding of the poem.
The girl defined the situation in terms of a quasi-examination and
located me in the teacher's position. She displayed what she tho-
ught she was expected to display, namely, the learned competence
of a good pupil.

This example reveals other possible motives of communicative
ritualization. Informants are often asked to answer questions con-
cerning matters which they are unfamiliar with, yet which they feel
they ought to have some knowledge of. Having no determined views,
they may adopt verbal stamps that cover their poor knowledge, un-
certainty, or hesitation. They may be said to act under pressure
of a necessity to maintain their prestige in the eyes of resear-
cher. Thus Labov's suggestions that formally high speech may
cover substantively poor information (1972), may be applied direc-
tly to the problem of ritualisation. Another motive of ritualisa-
tion may be in that some informants presume that patterns of ca-
sual, ordinary talk are inadequate to the research act situation
and that they ought to use more conventionalised ways of speaking.

Almost all these cases constitute acts of communication which
take place under the pressure of some norms that require or impel
someone to maintain the contact even if it is unpleasant or objection-
able for him. An exception is the last case, when an informant
may be easy to cooperate with, but feels an uncertainty whether
his communicative skills are sufficient to cope with the task for-
mulated by the sociologist and thus he resorts to ritualising his
speech production. In some respects these phenomena could be rela-
ted to B. Malinowski’s concept of phatic communication (Mal-
inowski, 1946). However, while Malinowski’s intention was to
describe such occasions on which the participants engage in verbal
exchange for the sake of talking itself, the situations mentioned
above revolve around the negative definitions of situation aimed
at avoiding a disclosure of one’s personal and private views. Ne-
evertheless, such contact maintenance, although it is brought about
by non-spontaneous motives to communicate, seems to be one of the
more salient properties of ritualised communicative conduct, beca-
use the tendency towards ritualisation is likely to occur as a
contingent solution whenever at least one of the participants
finds reasons for preventing refusal or for breaking the contact.

The main sources of ritualised communication patterns and stra-
tegies can be found in practices of institutions which govern the
public discourse. They have created a distinct speech style that
penetrates into everyday communication. The core of the problem is
not that the vocabulary and stylistic properties of that speech
are getting conventionalised, but that people learn who can be the
official legitimate sender in public communication and how they
should construct their messages in order to conform with those tak-
en from the public discourse. By and large, people learn that in
the public communication it is more important “what-has-been-said-
-so-many-times” than what could be said from their own perspecti-
ve. The pattern to be followed is known from broadcasts or press
interviews, which are known to be controlled and often prepared
according to a carefully written script. As a result, the infor-
mants may be well aware of the fact that the public discourse is to replay and thus confirm what everybody should know and share. The possibility for easy identification of the specific "journal-lee" of mass media and official pronouncements with the language used by sociologist changes according to the eagerness of political spokesmen and journalists to appropriate the vocabulary of social science.

The two way transfer of the communicative culture between mass media and sociological research based on extensively surveyed samples, i.e. probably unavoidable. It implies that we should not feel entitled, at least for some topics of investigation, to refer our results to the original objectives of study. I suggest that for the studies of "social consciousness" we are able, at best, to estimate the degree to which our informants are exposed to and to which they accept some specialized modes of speaking and communicating derived from the public discourse. Moreover, it is possible to state when these patterns are visibly displayed and thereby identifiable, i.e., when we are able to recognize the areas of high conventionalisation in their speech. Nevertheless, we have little or no possibility to control the degree of ritualisation, if the research act context is maintained for negatively defined phatic reasons, and the patterns of speech style and vocabulary are drawn from everyday modes of talking.

The consequences of such ritualisation of research acts in sociology depend heavily on the type of social and political structure of the society. The more open is the public discourse and the more autonomous is the common image of sociology, the less ritualised is the informants' conduct. I think, however, that the processes of ritualisation are so multifarious, both with regard to the dynamics of a particular occasion and to the properties of the situation of research as a whole, that they are hardly controllable. There is no chance to prevent or eliminate them on the level of short-term, superficial contacts between informants who are forced to act like machines for giving answers and interviewers who may be described in terms of sensing devices. The problem of ritualised communication may thus be seen as a contribution to the discussion of the proper application of communication based techniques.
References


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