

Little Dramas of Discomposure: On Doing Face-Work with Disaligning Actions

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Everyday life is full of little physical signs of discomfort and discomposure. Usually, they are attributed to mere bodily reactions which the portrayer does not control. However, that is not an abstract fact, but a definition of the situation that is a social achievement. This achievement is consequential: it allows for a form of everyday communication from which intention is drained, but judgment is not. Little dramas of discomposure are thus important elements of face-work that can be analyzed as such: They allow for a negotiation of identity through reaction to ascriptions made by others, but reactions that remain on the back stage and thus avoid negotiations of rank and hierarchy that would usually accompany communications of judgment.

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LITTLE DRAMAS OF DISCOMPOSURE: DOING “JANUS-WORK” THROUGH DISALIGNMENT DRAMAS

Interactionist sociology has long held that we present and negotiate our social identities through dramas of face-work (Goffman 1959, 1967, 1971, etc.). This entails a cornucopia of presentations of self, with multiple faces in different situations. However, people often find themselves in dilemmas of face within the *same* situation, where one relationship and its associated role expectations can only be protected through projecting a face that damages another relationship and its concomitant expectations, if noticed. Ideally, in such cases, one would have to present two faces at the same time. I wish to call such attempts “Janus-work” after the Roman god Janus, who is usually portrayed as a statue with two faces.

There are many ways to present different faces simultaneously, but this paper discusses only one: using signs of physical discomposure as displays of criticism that can at the same time be hidden by attributing unintentionally to them. A twitching upper lip or eyelid, a sudden focus of the eyes, inhaling deeply or gasping, looking

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away for a split second and looking back, a muffled sigh, closing your eyes a tiny moment too long—in poker and in life, such, and similar, displays not only convey irritation, but appear to be beyond conscious agency. They are quickly framed as mere reflex reactions, signs that “just slipped out.” I will call them “little dramas of discomposure.”

In interactionist sociology, the question is not whether these displays were “really intentional” or whether the sender is “really shocked” at their own comportment. They are seen as instances of symbolic interaction, in which definitions of the situation and the selves involved in those situations are presented and negotiated (Blumer [1969] 1986; Stebbins 1969; Thomas and Thomas 1929, etc.). “Intention,” “shock,” “merely physical reaction,” “loss of control,” etc. are definitions of the situation to be achieved in that situation. Rather than debate the epistemological (and sociologically quite irrelevant) question whether they are “truly” any of these things, interactionists care about what is achieved by these definitions: *what happens*, with Dewey, *if we believe them*, i.e. when action proceeds on the basis of them.

Utilizing existing scholarship on “aligning actions,” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976), I will discuss how “little dramas of discomposure” can be used to achieve a Janus-faced double aligning action in dilemmas of face. Since they appear as “merely physical” reflexes, they allow dramatized *disalignment* with one interaction partner through a drama enacted physically, clear enough to be picked up on and defined as a disaligning action. At the same time, they are dramatized as a physical reflex (i.e., *little* enough), thus adding an additional sign that “conscious control” caught on to the involuntary irritation and quickly moved to rein them in. This can help avoid having *responsibility* ascribed to them as intentional actions. They thus remain deniable, protecting alignment with the target of the initial disalignment by making further disalignments based on them difficult. Using the metaphor of Janus as the god of doors and boundaries, this allows different audiences to choose different doors to the selves of these presenters, maintaining different boundaries of group alignments at the same time.

ALIGNMENT AND DISALIGNMENT

Selves are relational and processual: who one is is negotiated in what Cooley (1922) famously called the “looking-glass self,” where we anticipate what others’ role ascriptions toward us are and position ourselves to these anticipated expectations. “We live in the minds of others,” not in the sense that their anticipated expectations are necessarily met, but only in that they are referenced in our behavior. We can acquiesce to them, resist them, offer up new expectations with the aim to get others to acquiesce to those new lines, or negotiate. “One thing [a person] cannot do, as long as he remains a rational member of society, is to ignore [them, M. D.]” (Shalin 1992:13). All of them constitute different forms of joint action, of “doing things together.” (Becker 1986).

The process in which we play with these anticipated expectations to portray relationships and belonging with others, to present “being together” in our joint action and definition of the world, has been partially discussed in the scholarship on aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt 1976). Aligning actions are forms of “repair work” that come up when joint action runs into trouble and is to be reestablished, with an aim of “aligning individual lines of conduct when obstacles arise in its path.” (Stokes and Hewitt 1976:839) When behavior has been defined as problematic (concretely, by concrete participants in actual situations), aligning actions arise to make it “unproblematic” again. This can happen after or before the rift arises, i.e. retrospectively or prospectively (Hunter 1984:157), either verbally or nonverbally. The great majority of aligning action scholarship focuses on repair work that is both retrospective and verbal, though a significant minority concerns prospective alignments, such as disclaimers (Albas and Albas 1993; Hewitt and Stokes 1975) or pretexts (Goffman 1971). This line of analysis has strongly emphasized acquiescence, how persons try to get in the “right light” with people after problems arise (or stay in the right light by preventing problems from arising), using strategies that “short-circuit conflicts by providing situationally and culturally acceptable antidotes to problematic behavior.” (Young 1997:292)

On this basis, some authors have criticized interactionist work for putting too much emphasis on how people do things *together* and too little on how they do them *apart*, conflictually (e.g., Gouldner 1970; Kanter 1972). Aligning actions do, indeed, emphasize strategies to *repair* broken interactions or prevent such breaches, which implicitly agrees that conflicts are problems to be overcome. They build on Goffman’s insight that face-saving is a fundamentally cooperative affair (1967) as everyone wants to stay in a right face, and assume that alignment is the normal case, whereas disalignment is the “problem.” This cannot, however, be taken for granted. First of all, to define a situation as broken is an achievement, a strategy in the presentation of self: one defines something as problematic and simultaneously defines oneself as the kind of person who sees this as a problem, thus doing face-work through distancing oneself. “The use of these strategies is intended to retain ascriptions of belonging in the groups and with persons toward whom these strategies are used. They are utilized to save the reactor’s position in a group” (Dellwing 2009). Goffman notes as much when he writes that “when an individual is in a public place, he is not merely moving from point to point silently and mechanically managing traffic problems; he is also involved in taking constant care to sustain a viable position relative to what has come to happen around him, and he will initiate gestural interchanges with acquainted and unacquainted others in order to establish what this position is” (1971:154). People distance themselves from others, refuse alignment when offered, and sometimes engage in heavy dramatizations of *non*-belonging. Face-work is not exhaustively described in the actions people take to protect and mend sociation, but needs to take into account actions taken to prevent and break sociation.

In fact, aligning actions are always already (“an old but still useful formulation,” as Fish reminds us, 2011:272) inseparably tied to disalignments: Focusing on verbal

“accounts,” Lyman and Scott term them a “linguistic device employed whenever an action is *subjected to* valuative inquiry.” (1989:112, emphasis mine) This emphasizes the active character of definitions of “problematic behavior”: it is not automatically given, but its character as “problematic” depends on action engaged in by participants in the situation. Goffman (1967:20) also notes this when he insists that situations do not break by themselves but require *challenges*, i.e. persons who will communicate a breach, *disalign* so that alignment will then have to follow. It can also be one’s expectation of a challenge from someone else that turns behavior into problematic behavior (“virtual offenses,” Goffman 1971), a self-challenge in expectation of others. “Conscience” is the term we usually reserve for self-problematizations when they are not dramatized as proactive, but as internal struggles. People will use these challenges strategically to get another into the “wrong face,” in a situation where that other person now has to align. Pranks are games specifically aimed at exclusion through getting people into wrong faces or out of face (Goffman 1967:8). There is strong incentive to get people in such positions, as they then incur debts that can be collected later. Disalignment is a recursor to alignment, and it is just as much strategic, dramaturgical interaction as is alignment.

Thus, alignments require at least the assumption of disalignment to arise, and disalignment is neither automatic nor a “fault” in interaction. Indeed, breaches can be sought after by those to whom they are attributed. Goffman, for instance, notes that sometimes physical proximity is enough to be lumped together with people, prompting the well-known shows of distance from those around oneself that one does not wish to be identified with. Social disalignment against the physically close is, at the same time, an attempt to get onlookers on one’s side, to align with them. Two people aligning in concert to defend a definition of social reality will do this exactly *because* there is another definition to oppose, to disalign from, or else the alignment would not even need to arise. One of the more obvious cases of such distancing can be seen in public relations, when public personalities or their spokespeople deny any relation to another figure, deny ever having done or said something or reinterpret the meaning of something that was said to fit a message or public image. Private persons engage in the same kind of public relations action when they deny whatever claims others have made about them, disaligning from those others and their claims, to realign with those they are trying to convince. Disalignment work can also entail nonverbal prospective repair work, such as glosses (Goffman 1971:130). Glosses are disclaimers which signal *motives* for otherwise strange actions, often with no-one in particular as the expected audience. For instance, pedestrians can stop, pat for keys, then turn around and walk back: accidental observers are to understand the reason for stopping, turning, and walking from whence one came, disaligning the forgetful pedestrian from anticipated negative ascriptions such as “weird” or even “mad.” Equally, someone will notice a stain on her/his shirt and rub it with their hands with an annoyed expression in full knowledge that the stain is dried and not removable in this manner. Accidental observers are to understand that she/he disapproves of the stain as well, thus avoiding the ascription that s/he is one who walks around in

stained clothes routinely: to disalign from one's stain is to align with these onlookers. This is the normal case. As meanings are only sensibly understood as boundary work against other meanings, performances that dramatize good standing (or the hope that others will attribute good standing) in one social group entail the parallel presentation that one is *not* of another group.

Every disaligning/aligning action is, then, an instance of *choosing sides*. In an open, ad hoc world, those alignment-disalignment vortexes need to be juggled, as situations, i.e. the different persons and groups with different situational expectations are "a veritable filigree of trip wires." (Goffman 1971:106)

ANALYZING "JANUS-WORK"

I now want to focus on a specific, and so far rather overlooked, form of nonverbal drama in which the simultaneity of alignment and disalignment is not only very visible, but where this visibility is indeed the major feature. In everyday interaction, there are nonverbal disalignments openly dramatized enough to be *seen*, but kept subtle enough for the presenter to remain able to deny that they were there. As if that was not enough, the presenter can also protect themselves again through "conscious disalignments" after they occur. They are tools of social life with which open, chaotic, ad hoc situations (Fish 1989; Shalin 1986) can be managed and fixed. They manage to make disalignments and alignments visible simultaneously: they first disalign with an object of disapproval through a critical gesture, while at the same time disaligning with that first gesture by having it understood as a "merely physical reflex." This disalignment with one's own criticism removes the intentionality from it, thus removes it from the "conscious self"—which serves to align the "real" person with the object of this "reflex" criticism again.

This double face presentation with which they do a double alignment work could be called *Janus-work*. Janus is the two-faced Roman god of doorways and boundaries: while our face is malleable and we present different faces at different times, a Janus-face presents two faces at the same time. The metaphor of doorways and boundaries can be pushed further: Janus-work allows us to present different doorways to our selves at once, offer two routes of approach via which others can ascribe identities to us. What others do with this offer, how they interpret the gestures given is open in interactions, but it is not entirely up to them in the sense of being a solipsistic choice to make. Just as we are bound by referencing the looking-glass self, even if there are many ways to do so, and the anticipation of others' expectations does not bind us to fulfill them, others are bound by these same anticipations in the same ways. Their interpretation takes place through the looking glass as well, in their anticipation of what interpretation is socially expected and what their chances are when they communicate an interpretation that is unexpected. Even if there are multiple faces to "see," Goffman's insight that there are usually expectations at work to keep the interaction going will make it more likely that the presented self that allows for such continuation is chosen. Though there are two (or more) doors, there is thus often a

strong incentive to see, and engage in joint action based on, only one. Lastly, Janus is also the god of boundaries, and this is equally applicable to the interpretation of Janus-work: It allows the actors to uphold different boundaries at the same time, to keep distinct selves distinct even when they clash in the same social situation.

Janus-work is an ingenious strategy to solve a dilemma of faces. In the form of little dramas of discomposure, it achieves this mixture due to an ascription of “unintentionality” (cp. also Goffman 1963:217): Disalignment can be done openly, explicitly, perhaps verbally (as would have to be the case in public relations, a front-stage activity), but is often done implicitly and nonverbally, as with glosses. Many strange and irritating situations are smoothed over by small and barely noticeable little signals that communicate “spill-cries” such as *oops* (Goffman 1971:101-3), with or without the enunciation, but with glances and facial movements of its nonverbal equivalent, a squinting of the eyes with a retraction of the lips. Goffman was adamant about removing such nonverbal dramaturgy from the realm of reflexes and meaningless gestures to be considered as strategic, intentional actions. “Intentional,” for interactionists, is not to be seen as a statement that there was “real intent”—that would not jibe well with the pragmatist mindset—but, rather, that it is socially defined as intentional and engaged in *toward a certain end*, as interpretive and contingent as that aim may be. This means that they are not to be defined *here* as intentional or unintentional. This is not the question. It is also not about whether intent *can* be ascribed to them. “Intention” is a definition of the situation. As such, it comes up, not in relation to some abstract truth it represents, but in relation to a situational context in which it achieves something, does work (Dewey [1922] 2007; James [1907] 1995; Rorty 1982, 1989, 1991, 1999), so that joint action can be based on it (Blumer [1969] 1986). The question is one of the *social definition* of intent: It is intentional when it is successfully acted toward as intentional, just as accounts are good when they “succeed[.] in restructuring the initial response of the offended and appreciably reducing the fault of the actor—at least among the fair-minded. And a ‘bad’ account is one that fails to perform that service.” (Goffman 1971:112) “Uncontrolled” or “pre-conscious” aligning and disaligning action is a definitional achievement that allows a display to be *acted towards* as a “giveaway,” *as a loss of pokerface*; indeed, were it interpreted as conscious, it would be seen as an attempt at bluffing and thus an instance of pokerfaced rather than a loss of it.

The present paper builds on Goffmanesque unstructured observations in public settings as well as a dramaturgical framework of interpretation to understand these double displays as presentations of self in everyday life that help the actors involved to achieve a self. To this end, scenes were collected over an open period of time in open settings, in everyday life. The research practice followed was the equally Goffmanesque stance, to be always ready to turn any and all situations one finds oneself in into material to be analyzed dramaturgically. No special selection was made, no limitations were placed on my own involvement, and any and all material was fair game. There is no rigid methodological way to guarantee a structured interpretive order: Order emerges just as any other social category does, and the

structuring was done as “comparative analysis,” grouping the different observations into different processes of alignment and disalignment (Dellwing and Prus 2012; Prus 1996, 1997). The material used here springs from everyday observation in any and all social situations I found myself in, a notepad or the note function on a smart phone serving as utensils to jot down wherever and whenever interesting interactions occur. This was first done as “scribble,” then expanded after the interactions ended and thickly described with a specific eye to detailed, rich description of “physical dramas” and reactions to them. They were then ordered with “alignment” and “disalignment” as a sensitizing concept and ordered into different alignment-disalignment-combinations. To get to definitions of alignment/disalignment, the reactions of interaction partners and bystanders were also crucial.

Discomposure dramas that were observed could then be grouped by the relationship ascriptions they make and by the role relations in which they come up. Weaker social relationships do not need many discomposure dramas (as there is no connection to sever where none is assumed), but can carry more of them (as there is little to no right to “call out” one’s interaction partner). Stronger, but equal, relationships are engulfed in the danger of discomposure dramas failing, as the friendly relationship will lead to participants assuming the right to call their friends on their discomposures. The interesting part are those close, but unequal relationships, where one side has a right to call out such dramas while having little need to present them.

LITTLE DRAMAS OF DISCOMPOSURE

One observed scene involved two acquaintances, both male and students, who barely knew one another, in a public setting. They came to an exchange over recommended vacation spots in a specific region, and the discussion came to places and cities to visit in that region: beaches, museums, landmarks, clubs were on the itinerary. One recommended a city as being home to “great strip clubs,” apparently seriously, without smiling, adding strip clubs to the lineup without disconnect. This elicited a drama of discomposure in the other participant: a smirked smile, and a slightly puzzled look, a slight tilt of his head, clearly visible to the audience. After this short reaction, the other participant returned to the interaction, but did not continue it for long afterward. After a few more sentences, he politely excused himself and went his way.

There are multiple aspects of little dramas of discomposure visible: the other participant disaligned from the strip club recommender in various ways while not creating an open rift. The smile, head tilt, and puzzlement communicated irritation, but their slight nature and quick cessation can be seen as presentations to label them “reflex reactions,” while the subsequent cessation of the interaction under other pretenses reinforced the disalignment, again without openly acknowledging it. “Laughter is not merely as sign of amusement but also can signify any number of different things, including superiority and/or derision” (Francis 1994:147), thus

disalignment. While too open a laugh runs the risk of being ascribed as intentional, and makes the derision likely to be read as “public,” thus eliciting counters and an open conflict, a slight smile that ceases quickly can hide behind the veil of reflex reactions, possibly emphasized through a quick reining in of that smile. Slight, reined in smirks, are little dramas of discomposure, saving Janus-faces: they allow the interaction partner to uphold joint action without open conflict while communicating to onlookers and “overhearers” a disconnect from these recommendations.

There are two ascriptions in the unsolicited recommendation that serve as objects of disalignment: one, if a stranger communicates his affection for gentlemen’s clubs, he is assuming a strong social relationship and could be seen to define the social relationship between the two as stronger than the recipient had defined it to be. The little show of discomposure rejects this definition of the relationship. The other ascription is one in which the volunteering participant could have assumed that the listener usually visits gentlemen’s clubs and is thus in need of such information. This assumption carries a dishonorable connotation, thus leading to disaligning action (and the rejection of a closer relationship in public). Both disalignments, however, protect alignment while dramatizing distance. To openly reject the relationship destroys face all around and makes ascriptions that had not been openly made before, thereby possibly eliciting paranoia ascriptions as defense tools. An inquiry, as to whether the other side supposes oneself to be the kind of person that visits strip clubs, could be defined as equally paranoid and overly sensitive, especially when no relationship is established. Both could have been defined as a first offense, and possibly were classed as “virtual offenses” to avoid being the recipient of the unwelcome ascriptions. In other words, they would have entailed the risk of disalignment not just with the unwelcome ascriptions, but also with the group of “normal interactors.” However, no reaction—just taking it without any sign of discomfort—would have let the relationship ascription and/or the dishonorable ascription stand. They would have allowed the other to define the recipient by himself who, merely accepting them, would have been subdued. If there are bystanders watching (which there were, including the author), the disalignment may be necessary for the sake of anyone who might witness the (audible) exchange, the more so if there are relationships to protect with members of the audience. The little drama of discomposure allows a reaction that keeps the other’s attempt at gaining definitional authority at bay while avoiding any virtual offense.

In this example, the ascriptions were relatively mild, and the personal connection relatively weak. The weaker any alignment is assumed, the less of a disaligning action is necessary. Why would anyone care excessively about a detrimental ascription by a complete stranger which is unlikely to cause any serious consequences or to influence the opinions of anyone relevant for the face of the recipient? (To care is, of course, the angry young man’s source of much wanted trouble, as it allows *action* as a path to defining oneself, cf. Goffman 1967). At the same time, and perhaps ironically, the weaker the personal relationship, the stronger a discomposure drama action is possible: There is no relationship to protect and no assumption of a right of others to

call out slight signals. The stronger the relationship, the more open the interaction, the more likely that people will be called out for their discomposure dramas.

Another observed example took place on a crowded night flight. Again, there were no relationships between the disaligner and the others. This is an interesting case, as the setup is such that there is little private retreat to be had and interactions cannot be hidden very well, while the surroundings are almost exclusively anonymously public. Thus, shows of discomposure are common, be it the wrinkled nose of the man sitting next to the unkempt one, the dramaturgically enhanced cramping of the woman sitting next to an obese passenger limiting her seating space, or the unnerved expression of those sitting close to small crying children not their own (or, sometimes, even their own). In the present example, the middle row was made up of three seats, two of which were occupied by young children sleeping. The third seat was occupied by a man not related to the children (the parents sat behind them). The man was not sleeping, but reading, for which he left the light on. The children were thus lying in faint light, tossing and turning, obviously unable to sleep. An elderly woman seated diagonally behind the man kept giving him stern looks, no doubt indicating that *he* is the reason the children were unable to sleep. At one—and only one—point during the night, the man caught the elderly woman's eye (who kept staring throughout the night, while the man was not looking), eliciting a facial show of puzzlement: he slanted his eyes, tilted his head, narrowed his lips and gave a bewildered glance, a little drama of discomposure.

The interaction is rich. The man received an evil eye, a nonverbal challenge ascribing a deviant status to his actions and, consequently, him. Had he reacted openly, defending himself against the charges, even verbalizing it—"do you think I'm a bad person? Well, I'm not, because I have the right to read here" or something of that sort—he would have seemed strange, perhaps mad, trying to penetrate a veil of deniability afforded by nonverbal ascriptions in a situation where no status position or social coalition can offer help to enforce this penetration. In this context, direct reaction would likely have been read as a first offense. However, had he merely, perhaps even shyly looked away, he would have taken the charge lying down and would have been successfully shamed by the elderly lady. Both open reaction and non-reaction are, in their own way, defeats: in the first instance, he would acknowledge the charge enough to defend himself against it, thus "knighting" it by giving it a status of a charge that has to be responded to, and would have lost in the response, as onlookers would likely have thought the interaction strange at best. In the second, he would lose by being positioned as deviant by the elderly lady: in situations in which no coalitions serve to enforce ascriptions, the only way to win ascription games is when the other side can be brought to accept the label. The short, physical reaction that could be observed, the "puzzled look," rejects the attack by labeling it "unintelligible" (a source of puzzlement), thus rejecting the proposal that there is anything to be attacked for and countercharging the woman for being strangely conflictual. He rejects any detrimental definitions of his self that may go along with it and turns these definitions on the woman, all in a look that entails the

same deniability as the challenge. The woman is not in a position, conversely, to react with an open charge; the tables are now turned, and a second physical drama, possibly even a third, would strain the ascription of unintentionality.

Another anonymous drama of disapproval could be observed in situations in which the offender does not notice the other person and hence the offense. In a crowded cafeteria, a man was in a woman's way, but with his back to her; when she tried to walk around him, he moved to the side, blocking the way again. The woman then pressed her lips together, went back to the original spot and passed him there. Since the man's block was socially construed as unintentional—after all, he did not see the woman, who was also considerably shorter than him—he could not be openly chastised by her, lest she seem overly combative (there is also a reproduction of a woman's role here, but that is another subject). However, he made her go back and forth, making her look jittery and powerless, purely reactive to a block that could not be removed, only circumvented. The little drama of disapproval communicates an attempt at dissociation from this powerlessness role, with the reactive demeanor shown and therefore with the “weaker” role in the situation. The woman attempts to take the superior role of judging someone's inept movements, but without the need to openly chastise, and thus not only take a combative role that could be construed as defensive (and fuel the weakness role), but creating disalignment with a stranger. Needless to say, onlookers may ascribe a weakness role nevertheless precisely because no open, yet polite interaction was engaged in.¹

All of these examples are discomposure dramas in public: they protect *public* faces in situations where there are no deeper relationships to protect on either side, as the interaction partner is a stranger and the relationships with the public are generic, “generalized other” interactions, and are face negotiations between strangers. Little dramas also come up within relationships, when people disalign themselves in public with people who know them in favor of a public made up of generalized others. It is immediately clear that this is a loyalty conflict: in public, we are supposed to support our friends against people we do not know, but some things friends do cannot be supported. Little dramas of discomposure now offer a strategy to disalign from them without openly, and responsibly, standing against them.

These are often publicly relevant disalignments, i.e. alignments to narratives and selves that are in line with public, political expectations for “good citizens.” An instance of this occurs when someone starts hinting at taboo or politically risqué subjects without explicitly verbalizing them. Someone's statements could be construed as racist, sexist, or the like, but are interpreted as being just short of *clearly* offensive. When they are hidden behind a veil of hinting and circling, an open defense against the offensive statements may again be seen as paranoid and could be struck down with an offended statement such as “I didn't mean THAT” or “who do you think I am?,” or the like. These dramatizations also come up when more open offensive statements are given by people who cannot be openly disaligned from, i.e. verbally challenged for status reasons. Again, the “pain pinch” and other dramas manage a disalignment with the statement or hint while hiding the disalignment

behind a veil of unintentionality, thus protecting alignment with the target. This is especially important in status difference situations where one continues to be dependent on the target. Especially in these cases, such shows can continue with open signals that underscore the lack of intentionality (such as the interrupted smirk): a “drama of recomposure” can follow, such as an interrupted headshaking movement that will not be one since it ends in “half a shake,” a “recovery drama” after the pain pinch (signaling short shock at one’s pinch and ending it) or the pressed lips. These dramatize a conscious disalignment from one’s discomposure, a dramatization to distance the intentional, conscious self from a reaction *thereby dramatized as* unconscious. This reaction-to-the-reaction-show supports the socially anticipated interpretation that the discomposure was unconscious and thereby makes it so, socially: what is defined as real is real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1929).

There are also dramas of discomposure that protect relationships on both sides, especially in situations in which dependence is ascribed. In an office situation, a superior at work became the talk of the break room: he was labeled ineffective and incompetent, an ascription that was concealed in his presence. This led to some assignments given by him to be seen as nonsensical, counterproductive and naive. Open distancing from his plans and assignments was not possible without breaking hierarchy. Here, an interesting double-drama was performed in an instance where such an assignment was given in full view of the (open) office: The recipient, pressed her lips together, blinked her eyes a split-second longer than expected, and very slightly nodded (more: moved) her head down, only to “catch” herself, refocusing on the superior, removing the pressed-together lip gesture from her face and acknowledging the assignment. This little drama of composure captures nicely the double nature of the drama performed. In the first instance, a disalignment with the superior is communicated to onlookers, thus aligning her with them in their common ascription of identity to the superior, preventing any interpretation that she agrees with the assignment or supports her superior in giving it. The drama of discomposure is hidden behind the veil of merely physical reactions, an interpretation strengthened by the second drama, the drama of “recomposure.” Quickly reining in her own reaction serves to dramatize the original disalignment as a mere physical reaction, unintentional, immediately ceased as soon as “conscious self-observation” gets wind of it and shuts it down, thus denying any disalignment and (hopefully) protecting alignment with the superior. Goffman (1963:263) notes this as the situational question whether someone would change behavior were s/he to be told about its significance (to others), given the opportunity to change it. In this case, the person dramatizes “changing her own behavior” once s/he *informs her-/himself* of it, notes what is *thereby*, through this reining in, emphasized as “merely physical” discomposure.

Dramas of discomposure can be played with. Far from being a game of interaction rules to be kept, I follow Goffman’s lead in viewing interaction rules as playthings (1967; cp. Dellwing 2010): They are not set-in-stone expectations, but quite situational, shifting and fluctuating “looking-glass” expectations, continuously calibrated

toward one another. In a café, a group of friends sits, joking, ripping one another: another member is newer in the group, and surrounded by the others, she makes fun of some of the others—immediately followed by a widening of the eyes, a short moment of hesitation until the others laugh, at which point she laughs with them.

The in-group dramatized their in-group status by joking about one another benevolently: the sheer ascription of in-group status turned statements that would, in non-relationship settings, be deadly insults into friendly banter. The new member, uncertain whether she is a member, acted like one by joining the reciprocal roasting that was going on, quickly adding a little drama of discomposure, disaligning herself from the banter she has engaged in, then, joining the others in laughing. It is a sign of uncertainty and a wobbly entrance into the group: sociation was established through banter and laughing about it together, but only after a hiccup in the negotiation process. The little drama of discomposure was the hiccup that needed to be cleared out of the way for sociation to continue. It was, however, strategically useful, consequential. It was a hedge against a possible rejection by the group, a deference ritual. Uncertain whether she could be accepted, she dramatized disalignment for a second to allow others to join into the disalignment *by not laughing*, after which she could have made a joke about being sorry. The drama allowed a negotiation that would have been harder for the other side had she laughed immediately, making her fall from face much harder had the others chosen not to laugh.

This little drama exposes that little dramas can be played with, and are used quite strategically at times, and are much more than just “gestures that happen.” Psychoanalysis has often analyzed these phenomena as unconscious reactions to slights that cannot be verbalized because the reactant is not fully aware of them (e.g., Sullivan 1964:36-44). Dramaturgical sociology has no need for such a contraption. In pragmatist fashion, the “unconscious” can be seen as a definitional device that does work rather than a representation of some underlying reality. It comes up as a description of the “hysterical woman” in a period when women’s liberation movements came up and the independent woman was pathologized, i.e. when one way of talking came into conflict with another way of talking. One of them was not socially, morally accepted at the time and thus had to hide behind a “merely physical” cloak. Freud and Breuer aided this cloak by giving it scientific legitimacy. That provided a front-stage justification for dragging out the backstage description, which to this day wins Freud the honor of having liberated “submerged and dominated discourses.” Dramaturgists conceive of naturalizations of these kinds as attempts to remove something from the realm of public debate within a concrete discussion (e.g., Conrad 2007): By successfully claiming that these reactions are “merely reflexes,” “biological” reactions, or lie in the realm of the “subconscious,” little dramas of discomposure are removed from the realm of the ascription of intentionality. That also makes them useful to react to slights and problematic statements that, in turn, hide behind their subtleties and naturalizations and thus cannot be openly reacted to. They are actions that front-stage interaction, the kind that is socially labeled

“intentional,” cannot pick up on because it *may not* pick up on them as there is an expectation of standing alone with that definition if it did pick up on them.

JANUS-WORK AS A FACE-SAVING DRAMA

Little dramas of discomposure are important face-saving tools. They are a hybrid form of alignment that can uphold a Janus face through the strategic use of ascriptions of unintentionality to small facial gestures. The doorway, with Janus looking to both directions simultaneously, is thus one between alignment and disalignment, bridging them to achieve both simultaneously, to belong to both worlds on both sides of the boundary simultaneously. They are a disaligning action with regard to an interaction partner who carries a label or produced a sign, from which one wants to distance oneself, with other onlookers, bystanders, and acquaintances as an audience. At the same time, disalignment is hidden behind the body, thus protecting alignment with the interaction partner, who is the audience for the drama of physicality. This camouflage is a prospective protection against the very disalignment it entails. At the same time, the camouflaged reaction is simultaneously a prospective aligning action with regard to onlookers who are not to lump the listener in with the detrimental label. A drama of “producing uncertainty” is performed, where something that threatens face is reacted to in a little drama of a discomposure of uncertain intentionality. The uncertainty drama protects the reactor who, if s/he reacted more openly, could face repercussions in the form of denial by the other side, leaving the complainer with a label as “overly sensitive” or “paranoid.”

For this little drama to be successful, the camouflage *must not* be perfect: the reaction *must* be visible; enough to be noted from the outside, yet slight enough to be denied should a challenge arise. Typically, the interaction partner is much closer than are onlookers: whatever the outside picks up, the interaction partner will surely pick up as well. The camouflage is not meant to prevent the interaction partner from picking up on the reaction: if it succeeded in that, it could hardly work with the outside spectators. It is not meant to camouflage the reaction, it is merely meant to redact the *intentionality* from it, i.e. protect the reacting person from having intentionality ascribed to her/him. An interactionist treatment will forego the judgment whether they are really “intentional” or not altogether. Intentionality as a quality is simply not interesting here. It is not the analyst’s job to devise a definition of the situation for the actors and impose it on them. The question is not whether it *is* intentional, but whether it is *defined as such* in the situation and joint action is enmeshed with that definition.

Thus, the problem here is: can the interaction partner get away with calling it intentional, or can the utilizer of the little drama get away with calling it a reflex? The answer to this question is open. Little dramas carry no guarantees, and whether they will work or not is also a matter of looking-glass anticipation. A superior can use a superior role to ascribe intentionality, stick with the ascription over

professions to the contrary, and sanction disalignment over the resistance of the subordinate. In strongly hierarchical organizations such as the military, little dramas of discomposure are more likely to be “called out” and sanctioned than in more “egalitarian” surroundings. The deniability they offer thus can, but need not, serve as protection against the ascription of such role breaches. Power is, however, not set but also a definitional negotiation in open situations (cp. Hall 1985, 1987; Luckenbill 1979; Prus 1999), so these attempts can also fail.

The Janus worker is a particular and situational kind of marginal man. In ancient times, a Janus statue marked boundaries. In this sense, there are many more ways to present oneself in public to allow multiple “doorways to the self,” and many ways to have the self look in both directions of a boundary while sitting between two (or more) groups. Janus-work is a way of boundary work that, unlike classical boundary work, does not attempt to strengthen one group by placing the symbol/actor on either side of the border. Also, it makes no attempts to overcome the boundary either. Janus-work is a hybrid form of alignment and separation: it acknowledges and strengthens the boundary, but without taking the side of either side. By sitting on the fence looking either way, it strengthens the boundary on either side while at the same time showing where the passageway between the groups is. The Janus worker brings groups into contact while defending their distinctiveness.

Janus-work allows actors to present one face, one doorway to a possible self, to one audience while providing another doorway to other audiences. It becomes necessary whenever both audiences are in their own way problematic, thus triggering the need to appease both. This does not only include authorities, but anyone one expects to make a scene, to be defensive or vindictive. It can also come up when the interaction is with strangers where disalignment would be too much of a time and face investment, an overreaction to something that is not important enough an encounter, not important enough a relationship, to openly dramatize. This situation is common, and as a consequence, “Janus-work” is a staple of everyday life.

Little Dramas of Discomposure are but one form of Janus-work. Further ethnographic work in this field would be fruitful: there are many more ways to present multiple faces simultaneously. The interpretive perspective would suggest that they are inexhaustible. As we find ourselves in a pluralist universe, we must regularly balance multiple relationships at the same moment, and present selves that allow for multiple parallel ascriptions. As gestures do not have inherent meanings, attributed meanings are contextual and perspectival. Looking at persons from different perspectives generates different readings of their gestures, and in a looking-glass universe, gestures are always generated with anticipations of how they might be read. Hence, people will devise strategies to play with these different anticipations in situations with “multiple mirrors.” This opens the field of participant observation in everyday life to a wide array of Janus-work to document the different ways we achieve selves in a plural, contingent, contextually fluctuating world in “life as theater.” (Brissett and Edgley 2005).

NOTE

1. This is, of course, regionally different. It is often—partly jokingly—said that the demeanor of people whose way in a grocery store is blocked by another cart differs greatly by region. While in the South, people will say “excuse me” to get the other to move the cart, New Yorkers will push through, possibly insulting the person in the way, while Midwesterners will patiently wait until the other customers notice that they are in the way. When these dramas come up and what they mean is thus, of course, not universal.

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