

ON GIFT-BEARING OTHERS: CONSEQUENCES OF COMPLIMENTS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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INTRODUCTION

In poetry, compliments have been generously likened to "gentle kisses through a veil," and less generously seen as "hollow lies cloaking devious acts." A few Skinnerian reductionists have seen fit to characterize them as positive reinforcements. Is this what compliments actually do in everyday life? Far from being unabashedly positive, compliments emerging in everyday life often gives rise to feelings of uneasiness, defensiveness and cynicism.

Compliments may be defined as a person's positive evaluations of the following elements of another's front (Goffman 1939): 1) personal appearance, as hair, clothes, make-up; 2) performance, as behavior, deference, demeanor, accomplishments; 3) personal possessions, as auto, house, equipment. Compliments may be observed in terms of how they are communicated. They may emerge directly: "You have beautiful hair." "You did an excellent job." Compliments may come indirectly through supplemental conversation: "How did you get such a beautiful wood grain finish on that old table?" "I don't see how you completed that task with so many pressures and responsibilities." Qualifiers can also deeply affect indirect compliments.

Compliments vary in terms of intent, reception, and interpretation as they come to be defined in situ. A compliment defined as flattery generally connotes insincerity of the giver. But flattery is different from other compliments only in terms of how it is seen by the recipient. Virtually all of our respondents interpreted the compliment they received as sincere in some degree.

METHODOLOGY

Interviews of 245 cases in which compliments were given and recognized were completed in January-March 1973. Members of our research team sought out and observed unobtrusively in social situations where compliments were given. Compliments were recorded verbatim, the sex of the giver and receiver were noted and an interpretation of the recipient's overt reaction was made. At the end of the observed encounter, the researcher

contacted and interviewed the recipient (Berger, Luckman 1967). The recipient was asked about the identity and relationship with the person who gave the compliment and the nature of the social situation involved. The respondent was asked about his/her reaction to the compliment: was s/he comfortable, uncomfortable, embarrassed, or concerned about the giver's motives, or under obligation to return the compliment, and related issues.

Responses were analyzed according to the number of compliments "well-received" where there was no disruption of interaction, embarrassment or uncomfortable feelings, versus those which posed interactional difficulties for the recipient. Of the latter, an analysis was made of the respondent's reasons for feeling the way s/he did.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Frequently compliments do serve to validate presented selves, and to impart a sense of accomplishment and pride. They are frequently well received and appreciated. But in the majority of cases where compliments were given, our respondents reported feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, threatened, or under considerable obligation. In the 245 cases, 65 percent of our respondents felt some form of uneasiness about the compliment. Even with an extended interview, our respondents found it difficult to communicate or describe precisely what form that uneasiness took. Most felt that in some way they had deserved the compliment, but found it difficult to handle interpersonally. Generally there were no differences in male/female responses, but there were some interesting gender specific data in several categories.

There were six major reasons for feeling bitter-sweet about compliments.

- 1) Reciprocity.** The felt obligation to return a compliment. (30%)
- 2) Modesty.** The felt need to neutralize the compliment to avoid coming off as "conceited." (30%)
- 3) Ulterior motive.** Suspicion that incipient manipulation lay behind the compliment. (20%)

4) Impending criticism. Apprehension that giving the compliment was prelude to criticism. (10%)

5) Evaluation by a judge. Sitting in judgment by a "superior!" (5%)

6) Upping the ante. Being expected to continue or excel the level of praised performance. (5%)

RECIPROCITY

In interaction, giving compliments is often seen as requiring a reciprocal response, as equivalent praise returned later. Nearly 1/3 of our respondents felt indebted to the complimentor. Ostensibly a game of one-upmanship characterized this sense of reciprocal obligation. The giver of the compliment was one-up by virtue of verbal generosity, and the next move was up to the receiver. By ingratiating oneself to the other, the situation comes to be controlled in one's favor. Appreciation for the compliment was tempered by feelings of uneasiness over being obligated to the other. Accepting the compliment seemed to imply an informal contract to return at least an equal rhetoric of praise.

Reciprocity is a concept which is at the heart of traditional sociological inquiry. Gouldner (1960 161) defines reciprocity as a moral norm which governs a pattern of mutually contingent exchange of gratifications, citing Westermarck, that reciprocity is a universal principal element of human behavior: "To require a benefit, or to be grateful to him who bestows it, is probably everywhere, at least under certain circumstances, regarded as a duty." Parsons (1951 21) considers reciprocity inherent in the nature of social interaction, and Simmel (1950 387) saw his key concept, *sociation* resting on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence.

To maintain social relations, individuals must reciprocate. Our respondents recognized the fact that one of the quickest and most effective ways of terminating a relation with another is by failing to reciprocate compliments, gifts, and invitations. One of our respondents illustrated the point, saying that she made up her Christmas card list from the cards she received the previous year (Johnson 1971 40). About 80 percent of our respondents having received a compliment, intended to return it soon. Another study shows that people do, in

fact, return nearly all compliments. Members of our research team gave compliments to 10 different persons, including intimates, friends and acquaintances in one day, and found that 64 percent of the recipients had returned the compliment within three days.

MODESTY

On receipt of a compliment a person's gratitude for and acceptance of the praise must be negotiated so as to preclude any appearance of immodesty. Even when the compliment was thought to be deserved, the recipient reported that one must be careful not to bask in the praise. Comments were: "I don't want to appear conceited." "I don't want him to think I'm big-headed or stuck on myself."

It is clear that receiving a compliment poses a dilemma: the recipient must be grateful, but is faced with the interactional task of verbally neutralizing the compliment in order to remain "modest" in the eyes of others who hear it. Man's symbolic apparatus constructs meaning based on a host of nuances, and after the compliment has been given, the onus of responsibility for handling possible meanings shifts to the receiver (Becker 1962 494). About a third of our respondents reported feeling embarrassed and uncomfortable due to awkwardness and ineptitude at neutralizing praise: "I just can't handle compliments well!" "I didn't know what to say." Such awkwardness was very obvious in our observations of compliments. In several cases, the interaction was momentarily disrupted. Respondents blushed and stumbled over words in their replies, with their verbal fluency immobilized and their control of the situation shattered.

It is worth noting that we did observe a few cases in which recipients of compliments replied: "Thank you, I think the dress looks well on me too!" "Thank you, I think I did a good job too!" In such cases the complimentor appeared stunned, and his control of the situation evaporated.

Feeling compelled to maintain a modest front, recipients used several techniques to negotiate a balance between acceptable pride and inappropriate conceit. Some denied full responsibility for the accomplishment: "I can't take all the credit!" "I had lots of help from ...!" The reader who watched any Academy Awards show has probably been bored with

this gambit as stars heaped plaudits on innumerable directors, writers, producers, co-stars and auxiliary personnel who are credited with contributing to the success: "They deserve this award more than I." The strategy stresses the team dimensions of success and assuages the feelings of others who were unrecognized.

The receiver of a compliment may mitigate the importance of the accomplishment: "It was really nothing." "Anyone could have done it." "It was all in the line of duty." A third ploy used by recipients was pointing to defects in the object or behavior complimented: "Oh, I've had this dress for years." "The table would look much better if I had done more sanding." "I missed some lines in Act Three."

Such rhetorics of humility are ways of bringing the compliment back into perspective, and appearing modest while at the same time accepting the essential thrust of the compliment. A fourth reply was to allude to luck or circumstance. Success was discounted by crediting factors beyond the recipient's control: "I was in the right place at the right time." "Everything just fell into place." "I was lucky."

In a sense, these responses accomplish the objectives of both gratitude and modesty by establishing that fortuitous circumstances are partly responsible for the praised performance. These four types of responses partially neutralize the praiseworthiness of the compliment to avoid the audience imputing conceit to the actor.

ULTERIOR MOTIVES

Recipients of compliments are often uneasy in the interaction because of motives they impute to the giver (Mills 1940 904; Burke 1965). In social interaction people are constantly giving off reasons for their own behavior and interpreting the meaning of other's behavior; the latter involves the imputation of motives (Scott, Lyman 1968 46; Edgley 1970). We found that recipients of compliments often asked themselves this question: "Why is HE giving me a compliment?" The answer to that question has consequences for the reactions of the recipient and the resultant interaction. Of the cases in which compliments produced embarrassment, discomfort, and suspicion, 20 percent explained that the discomfort stemmed from believing that the giver had an ulterior

motive, and might be giving the compliment as part of a larger strategy of manipulation.

Several imputed motives emerged which identified the manipulatory strategy. These included sex, money, business contracts, reciprocal compliments and undisclosed favors. Our female respondents, on hearing compliments on their beauty or a 'sexy' dress imputed sexual motives to the praise. Such praise was termed *flattery* though it was not necessarily considered insincere. Some males interpreted compliments from females to mean: "I'm open to your advances." "I may be available." In business transactions a compliment was most often seen as a technique to secure or maintain the client's patronage. On that basis, the recipient interpreted the compliment as insincere: "He was trying to sell me a stereo recorder." "She complimented me so I would buy the outfit." The recipient in these cases clearly anticipated a reciprocal act in response to the compliment.

In sum, our respondents labored under the suspicion that the complimenter was not only giving the praise to reward a good performance, to admire a beautiful appearance or to recognize a prudent decision, but also to prompt or manipulate certain recipient responses for personal benefit. Imputation of such motives obviously qualifies the meaning of the compliment.

IMPENDING CRITICISM

Many respondents were wary and uncomfortable with a compliment because it was often followed with criticism. The compliment was seen as a setup for the later reproof: "You did a nice job, but ..." "The material in your dress is beautiful, *but* the horizontal stripes accentuate your weight." In such compliments, the addition of the words *but*, *however*, *on the other hand* are seen as ominous qualifications. The compliment is used to lessen the impact of a negative evaluation of a performance. It is a tactful way of censuring a person where direct criticism might be too discouraging and deflating. Having received these sugar-coated criticisms, a recipient becomes wary of the imminent and impending criticism. Sometimes recipients reported a reluctance to accept the compliment in order to avoid or forestall the reproof or the advice about how to do better the next time.

Respondents felt that the criticism devalued the effect of the compliment.

EVALUATION BY A JUDGE

A person who compliments another, momentarily sits in judgment. This is why subordinates are unlikely to compliment superordinates. The complimenter assumes the competence to evaluate the other and is presumptuous enough to verbalize it. An analysis of observed compliments in our respondents shows that recipients often interpreted the complimenter as having assumed a superior position by giving the compliments. The compliment: "I surely like the way you fixed your hair today" not only says that the person can judge what hair style looks best on the other, but also may imply that the former hair style was less attractive. At least momentarily, the complimenter is elevated to the identity of judge. Several respondents felt that these status implications of the compliment were among the most disagreeable.

A superior sitting in judgment produces uneasy responses even though the judgments themselves were laudatory. Complimenting seems to be one of the most effective ways of establishing and maintaining social distance. Compliments serve to remind us of our place in a hierarchy: "Your quarters are A-1, Private Jones." "For an assistant professor, you've done an excellent job." "Young lady, you're an excellent typist!" Such compliments commend a task well done, but also affirm identities that imply social distance. This seems to be one reason why subordinates are reluctant to compliment a superior. It is rather presumptuous to judge a person with a higher social identity than one's own.

UPPING THE ANTE

Compliments may also be a way of setting standards for anticipated performances. Our analysis of compliments shows that praise often established benchmarks for future behavior. "Keep up the good work!" means that from now on this is the quality of work we want from you. "Now that's the way I like your hair" means that in the future she should refrain from wearing her hair in former styles that were not as attractive. The compliment may therefore put the recipient on notice that this is a reward for present accomplishment,

but that future actions should be equal to or better than the complimented performance.

Our respondents showed frequently that they felt acceptance of a compliment put them on the spot, and that they might not be able to sustain or improve the new standard of performance. Although in many settings, persons are expected to excel, be beautiful, get the job done, and make the correct decisions, our respondents felt threatened by inflation of standards and rising expectations, and felt that the compliments upped the ante.

SUMMARY

Compliments are not what they seem. They encourage, reward, bolster self-esteem, and lubricate social relations, but our data and analysis show that compliments more often create interactional discomfort, embarrassment, defensiveness, and suspicion.

People desire, need, and expect praise via compliments; it is important for recipients to feel highly evaluated by others. The absence of praise would be even more discomforting if one knows one is being evaluated. Recipients of compliments interpret praise as "bitter as well as sweet," and often more bitter than sweet. Implicitly, compliments pose a double-bind and negative consequences for interaction. Recipients of compliments confessed a need and desire for praise and commendation, but the consequences of the acceptance of compliments led many to react warily: "Beware of people bearing compliments!"

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