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One-upmanship and putdowns: the aggressive use of interaction rituals in face-to-face diplomacy

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Abstract

When leaders meet in person, they perform a wide range of interaction rituals. They dress for the occasion, greet each other and shake hands, exchange pleasantries and gifts, arrive at the meeting venue and have themselves seated according to protocol, and so on. What do they make of the performance of such rituals? In this paper, I argue that leaders often take advantage of or outright flout what the sociologist Erving Goffman calls the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom' of an interaction – that is the intersubjective understanding they share on what rituals to perform and how to perform them – to realize a number of political and personal objectives, with larger international consequences. The 'ceremonial idiom' is deliberately transgressed and a counterpart's 'face' threatened – overtly but more often subtly – to achieve what are commonly known as 'one-upmanship' and 'put-downs' in interpersonal contact. Empirically, I demonstrate my argument with over two dozen episodes of face-to-face diplomacy across six categories of interaction rituals: the identity of leaders, gestural, spatial–physical, task-embedded, linguistic, and communication rules. I also outline several directions for future research.

Keywords: diplomacy; microsociology; interaction rituals; leaders; practices

'As I shook his [Omar al-Bashir's] hand… [I reminded] myself not to smile…' – US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on meeting the Sudanese President in Khartoum in July 2005, during the Darfur genocide.[1]

'We… debated whether we would shake hands' – the recollection of one of the American negotiators on how to approach Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić, when they met in Belgrade during the Bosnian War in September 1995.[2] In the end, some shook hands; others did not.[3]

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[1]Rice (2012, 388).
[2]Watkins and Rosegrant (2001, 250).
[3]Holbrooke (1998, 149).

When leaders[4] meet with each other, they perform a wide range of what the sociologist Erving Goffman calls 'interaction rituals'.[5] As in interpersonal contact in other realms of life – in business, romance, friendships, and so on – they dress up (or down) for an occasion, greet each other and shake hands, exchange pleasantries and gifts, arrive at the meeting venue at an agreed time and have themselves seated according to protocol, take pains to ensure that an exchange – however vacuous or unproductive – is properly brought to a close before they physically depart, and so on. Civility – although not always, as I explain in this paper – is the *modus operandi* of diplomacy. This is true even among adversaries. Take, for instance, the 'really awkward' handshake (in the words of one observer) between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Economic Leaders' meeting in Beijing in November 2014. The two leaders held on to each other's hand for seconds. They looked, however, reluctant.[6]

What do leaders make of the performance of such rituals? In International Relations (IR) theory, the 'cheap talk' paradigm of neorealism and rationalism has tended to dismiss the explanatory relevance of face-to-face diplomacy. Since leaders may say whatever they wish, they are not able to, nor should they normatively speaking, make much of what others claim. Face-to-face diplomacy, which by definition occurs mostly in a private setting and is therefore beyond public scrutiny, would be the 'cheapest' of all channels of communication.[7] If what leaders say carries little weight, presumably then, they cannot care less how others behave, including their performance of rituals.

However, leaders meet and negotiate with each other all the time. How can the 'cheap talk' paradigm explain the commonplace of face-to-face diplomacy?

Building on Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, some constructivists argue that when leaders gather and 'talk', they use words to persuade and argue,[8] or even rhetorically 'coerce' and 'entrap' others into compliance.[9] Words are meaningful. Other scholars have focused on the psychological dynamics of interpersonal contact. When humans, leaders included, are in each other's presence, they exude behavioral cues – in their voice, face and body – that inform others of their intentions.[10]

Their contribution notwithstanding, these two streams of research have overlooked the fact that people exchange not only words and behavioral cues; they also perform rituals. Failure to account for the latter has rendered them inadequate

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[4]In this paper, I use 'leaders' to refer to the major practitioners of diplomacy in a country. Hence, it includes not only heads of state and government, but also foreign ministers and others delegated with the power and authority to negotiate with a foreign government (Henry Kissinger as National Security Advisor; Robert Kennedy during the Cuban Missile Crisis, etc.).

[5]Goffman (1967).

[6]Groll (2014).

[7]For an overview of these studies, see Trager (2016).

[8]E.g. Mitzen (2005); Müller (2004); Risse (2000).

[9]E.g. Schimmelfennig (2001); Payne (2001); Krebs and Jackson (2007); Goddard (2008).

[10]Hall and Yarhi-Milo (2012); Holmes (2013, 2016, 2018); Yarhi-Milo (2014); Hall (2015); Wong (2016, 2019a, 2019b, 2020); Holmes and Yarhi-Milo (2016); Wheeler (2018).

to explain why face-to-face diplomacy is indeed *sui generis*.[11] After all, words and cues – positive ones such as trust and sympathy or negative ones like anger and hatred – can also be expressed on the telephone, in writing, through emails, video-conferencing, and even holographically (albeit attenuated in intensity and their authenticity less certain because of the lack of physical intimacy). In contrast, a handshake, walking down a red carpet, the exchange of gifts, the symbolism that comes with a particular seating arrangement, and so on, can only occur when leaders engage each other *in person*. 'Ritual', as Collins puts it, 'is essentially a bodily process'.[12] Without also an explanation for why and how leaders perform rituals and their impact on a relationship, the extant literature on face-to-face diplomacy is incomplete.

Finally, a body of literature has recently emerged in the constructivist tradition that ontologically privileges the role of diplomatic practices, among them interaction rituals, as explanation for international politics.[13] Practices, Pouliot explains, are 'socially meaningful and organized patterns of activities'. In lay parlance, they are 'ways of doing things'.[14] Interaction rituals, as practices, are the routinized behavior that leaders perform in each other's presence that constitutes the very reality of a relationship. As Pouliot notes: 'Insofar as they are meaningful, organized and repeated, practices convey a degree of mutual intelligibility that allows people to develop social relations over time.' A handshake, for instance, 'sticks as a greeting practice' because 'it allows its practitioners to go on with the rest of their interaction'.[15]

Practice theory is a welcoming development because it has disabused IR of what Pouliot calls its 'representational bias' – the tendency not only among proponents of the 'cheap talk' paradigm but also those of more 'traditional' constructivist approaches to 'focus on what agents think about (reflexive and conscious knowledge) at the expense of what they think from (the background know-how that informs practice in an inarticulate fashion)'.[16] But for the same reason, it has also been noted for its rather circumscribed view of human agency. As Holmes and Traven put it, practice theory and its associated logic of habit 'call for explicitly de-emphasizing the role of conscious rationality'. These studies imply that 'individuals do not act on conscious reasoning or choice, but rather they act on embodied practices and unthinking habits'. As such, 'they rest on a view of agency that is at once too structural and insufficiently cognitive to be used to understanding how

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[11]There are two exceptions. First, Holmes (2013, 2018) argues that the physical co-presence of leaders enables the simulation of intentions in the mirror system of their brains. Second, after Collins (2004), Holmes and Wheeler (2020, 144) suggest that face-to-face diplomacy allows leaders (although not always) to bond because it presents 'four conditions for the creation of positive emotional energy: bodily co-presence, mutual focus of attention, shared mood, and barriers to outsiders'. These conditions would be hard to recreate through other impersonal modalities of communication (Holmes and Wheeler 2020, 156–57; Collins 2004, 53–64; Turner 2002, 1).

[12]Collins (2004, 53).

[13]E.g. Neumann (2002); Hopf (2010); Adler and Pouliot (2011); Bueger and Gadinger (2015); Pouliot (2008, 2016); Adler-Nissen (2014a); Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014); Pouliot and Cornut (2015); Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (2015); Faizullaev and Cornut (2017); Nair (2019).

[14]Pouliot (2016, 49).

[15]Ibid., 51.

[16]Pouliot (2008, 260).

individuals make decisions…'. Since 'the body and the brain' are considered 'reflections of practices and structures', they cannot shed light on the '*individual sources of action in world politics*'. In reality, individuals do have 'the capacity to consciously reflect on their social practices and habits and to alter them accordingly'.[17] In the opening quotations, the American negotiators considered long and hard – they 'debated' – on whether to shake hands with the Bosnian Serb leaders. Similarly, Rice had to 'remind' herself not to smile when she shook hands with al-Bashir.

In this paper, I argue that interaction rituals are neither 'cheap' with nothing important that leaders are able to learn from their performance; nor are they 'mere' routinized behavior whose purpose is to facilitate an interaction. Instead, leaders often take advantage of or outright flout what the sociologist Erving Goffman calls the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom'[18] – that is, the intersubjective understanding that parties to an interaction share on *what* rituals to perform and *how* to perform them – to achieve a number of political or personal objectives. They manipulate their performance of a ritual, or in more extreme cases, refuse to perform it altogether. The 'ceremonial idiom' is deliberately transgressed and a counterpart's 'face' threatened – overtly but more often subtly – to achieve what are commonly known as 'one-upmanship' and 'putdowns' in interpersonal contact. To paraphrase Goffman, interaction rituals can be used aggressively.[19]

I present my argument in four sections. First, I explain the aggressive use of rituals based on a close reading of Goffman's microsociology. Second, I argue that interaction rituals – aggressively performed or not – have larger structural implications. As practices, they are constitutive of the international relationship (bilateral or multilateral) that leaders to an interaction embody. Third, I elaborate on leaders' motives for aggression. They may be political (i.e. to impose a preferred understanding of one's international relationship with a counterpart, or to register one's position on some disputed issue), or – as recent research suggests – personal (to boost one's ego) but nevertheless have political consequences. Fourth, I demonstrate my argument with over two dozen empirical episodes across six categories of rituals: the identity of leaders, gestural, spatial–physical, task-embedded, linguistic, and communication rules. In the conclusion, I outline several directions for future research.

Rituals as aggression in face-to-face diplomacy

What are interaction rituals? According to Goffman, they are, in the context of interpersonal contact, acts or events 'through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it'.[20] Rituals are performed as part of the interlocutors' 'facework'. By inclination, people have both 'a defensive orientation toward saving his own face and a

protective orientation toward saving the others' face'.[21] '[W]henever the individual is in the presence of others', Goffman argues, 'he is pledged to maintain a ceremonial order by means of interpersonal rituals'. He is obliged 'to ensure that the expressive implications of all local events are compatible with the status that he and the others present possess…'.[22] Save for the most hostile relationship (in which case the individuals in question would presumably have shunned any opportunity for direct personal contact), this would require the interlocutors to behave politely and courteously, through the performance of a repertoire of rituals, on what Goffman calls the 'front stage' of an interaction.[23]

Moreover, most rituals are performed 'merely' for their ceremonial function. They serve no substantive purpose. Consider again the handshake, or the exchange of gifts. Such rituals 'have secondary or even no significance in their own right'; instead, they are 'conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation'.[24] They convey basic respect in interpersonal contact. This is true among friends and foes alike: compliance with what Goffman calls the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom'[25] – that is, the intersubjective understanding that interlocutors share on *what* rituals they are expected to perform and *how* to perform them – does not necessarily mean that they are in good terms.[26] Their true feelings about each other can be kept and sequestered in the 'back stage'. As the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev reportedly said in a Politburo meeting (i.e. his 'back stage') in preparation for his confrontation with US President John F. Kennedy over their dispute on Berlin in the Vienna summit (i.e. their joint 'front stage') in June 1961: 'Gifts can even be made before a war'.[27]

Diplomacy is replete with interaction rituals.[28] Leaders 'are highly attentive to the social etiquette of communication'.[29] They often go to great lengths to prevent any undue loss of 'face', again even among adversaries.[30] As Richard Holbrooke attests, 'the normal pattern in international diplomacy [is] of outward cordiality masking animosity'.[31] Hence, the adjective – to be 'diplomatic' – in one's words and deeds. Politeness and courtesy are the *modus operandi*. Moreover, diplomacy is a 'highly symbolized world where any word, action, or relation can be seen as symbolic, as something that contains a wrapped meaning'. That is according to the diplomat and scholar Alisher Faizullaev.[32] In tandem, the heightened need for 'face maintenance' and respect and the fact that *some* meaning can be read symbolically into nearly every aspect of an interaction would suggest that leaders are

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[21]Ibid., 14.
[22]Ibid., 168–69.
[23]Goffman (1959).
[24]Goffman (1967, 54).
[25]Ibid., 56.
[26]Ibid., 35.
[27]Stelzl-Marx (2014, 269).
[28]Faizullaev (2013).
[29]Stephen (2015, 776).
[30]Mitzen (2015, 118).
[31]Holbrooke (1998, 116); see also Fletcher (2016, 156); and Nicolson (1939,1988, 122).
[32]Faizullaev (2013, 95).

always watchful of how they behave and sensitive to the behavior of others, sometimes to the extreme.

Take, for instance, the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945. In preparation for their first meeting, American, Soviet, British diplomats could not agree on their leaders' order of entrance into the venue because of the symbolism of relative standing an order – however arranged – would inevitably imply. To ensure that no one lost 'face' and was disrespected, they chose a venue with three separate doors. At 5 p.m. sharp on July 17, Truman, Stalin, and Churchill arrived simultaneously.[33] Deference was duly paid; embarrassment minimized.

In Goffman's dramaturgical analysis, individuals are often portrayed as more concerned with sustaining an interaction order than disrupting it. Instead of treating interlocutors as 'calculative manipulators seeking personal gain', they are assumed to be 'guardians of face-to-face situations'.[34] However they feel in their 'back stage', they engage in a 'tacit cooperation' to uphold each other's 'face' on the 'front stage'.[35] In the case that one's 'face' is threatened, various 'avoidance' (such as a change of subjects) and 'corrective' (such as an apology) moves may be made to restore the 'equilibrium'.[36] Face-to-face interactions therefore have the power to bind together – at least temporarily – even interlocutors who otherwise have conflicting interests, *in situ*. As Turner puts it, they create 'an emergent "we" feeling of solidarity and flow of feeling'.[37]

The extant literature in IR tends to support such sanguine reading of Goffman.[38] In a recent study, Nair notes: 'As every social interaction carries with it the latent risk of embarrassment, the chief social contract of the interactional world is a tacit quid pro quo: that I will not embarrass you as long as you do not embarrass me'. 'The *effect* of face-saving' is therefore 'a profoundly constitutive one: it serves as the chief interactional material producing and reproducing social order in everyday life'.[39] '[F]ace-saving practices geared to avoid embarrassment are micro-level mechanisms that produce international institutions like diplomacy'.[40] Using

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[33]Beschloss (2003, 256).

[34]Mannings (1992, 38).

[35]Goffman (1967, 29).

[36]Ibid., 15–23.

[37]Turner (2002, 22). Building on Goffman (and Émile Durkheim), theorists have subsequently elaborated on the social cohesive function of interaction rituals. Brown and Levinson (1987) explain why politeness – particularly the performance of polite speech acts – appears to be universal in interpersonal contact. They developed their theory after Goffman (61). Collins (2004) propelled Goffman's microsociology forward by specifying the 'initiating conditions' or 'ingredients' inherent to the structure of face-to-face interactions (see footnote 11) that enable their participants, through rituals, to experience moments of (in Durkheim's language) 'collective effervescence'. 'Ritual', as Collins defines it, 'is a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership' (7). Collins' insights have been applied in IR recently. In his study of international exchange programs, Pacher (2018) asserts that the interaction rituals between participants and the 'public diplomats' of host countries constitute the 'political mechanisms' that bind 'human collectives together' (894). Holmes and Wheeler (2020) employ Collins to shed light on why leaders are sometimes able to 'hit it off' in person while other interactions 'fall flat' (133).

[38]However, see Adler-Nissen (2014b).

[39]Nair (2019, 680); emphasis original.

[40]Ibid., 673. Mitzen similarly emphasizes the constitutive effect of the 'routines, ceremonies, rituals of diplomacy' on the international states system. As diplomatic practices, she argues, they 'sustain an ethos

Goffman's framework to explain covert military operations between countries, even among adversaries, Carson contends that '[i]nstead of a lonely and selfish exercise, social interaction involves a "general conspiracy to save face so that social situations can also be saved"'.[41] Pouliot, meanwhile, argues that Goffman's microsociology cannot adequately make sense of diplomatic practices because he 'and his followers did not insist enough on the processes of struggle – that is, the never-ending politics – that sustain interaction orders'.[42] As such, my reliance on Goffman to illuminate how leaders get the better of each other through face-to-face interactions might appear, at first glance, to be a misfit.

But throughout his writings, particularly those produced from the 1960s onward,[43] Goffman also demonstrated a shift in emphasis on the metaphor of the theater as a way to understand interaction order to that of a game.[44] The strategic impulse of individuals became more apparent.[45] 'Whenever students of the human scene have considered the dealings individuals have with one another, the question of calculation has arisen', Goffman writes in the opening sentence of his essay, *Strategic Interaction*.[46] Rules constrain behavior, but they are also to be 'taken into consideration' – hence, active deliberation is expected – 'whether as something to follow or to carefully circumvent'.[47] As Turner explains, for Goffman, it is '[o]n the basis of their location in a sociocultural system' that individuals 'make strategic assessments, deliberate on situational expectations, and decide how to present self'.[48] Calculated self-interest goes hand-in-hand with social conformity as motives for behavior on the 'front stage'. Machiavelli figures as prominently as Durkheim in Goffman's microsociology.

Hence, individuals always have the flexibility to 'transgress' the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom'. Whether they have the motive to do so, however, is an empirical question. To understand why 'acts or events' of 'ceremonial transgressions' are permissible – if not widespread – in social life generally but perhaps particularly in diplomacy would require first the realization that the 'maintenance of face is a condition of interaction, not its objective'.[49] People may 'go along' with an interaction order 'for a wide variety of reasons, and one cannot read from their apparent tacit support of an arrangement that they would… resent or resist its change'.[50] The

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of mutual respect that can help support… [the] collective intentions' of leaders for global governance (Mitzen 2015, 136).

[41]Carson (2016, 110), quoting Manning (1992, 39); see also Banks (2019).

[42]Pouliot (2016, 55).

[43]For instance, see the final chapter of Goffman (1967) on what he describes as instances of 'interpersonal action'; and Goffman (1961, 1969).

[44]Manning (1992, 56).

[45]As Schimmelfennig (2002) writes: 'Depending on the writings one draws on, Goffman's conceptualization of actors varies between a highly socialized 'self' with little personal autonomy and individuals that strategically calculate their behavioral moves and manipulate social situations for their own advantage' (421).

[46]Goffman (1969, 85). For a detailed overview on how Goffman studies the 'question of calculation', see Ytreberg (2010); and also Smith (2006, 45–50). For Thomas Schelling's brief comment on the strategic-interactive nature of Goffman's study, see Schelling (1960, 128).

[47]Goffman (1963, 42).

[48]Turner (2002, 23).

[49]Goffman (1967, 12).

[50]Goffman (1983, 5).

'mutual acceptance' of the need for 'face maintenance' may be 'a basic structural feature' of interactions. Goffman caveats, however, that it is 'typically a "working" acceptance, not a "real" one, since it tends to be based not on the agreement of candidly expressed heartfelt evaluations'.[51] Hence, the apparent civility that leaders *normally* show in each other's presence – or for that matter, in our everyday life – may only be a façade. To borrow Stephen Krasner's words, there is always an element of 'organized hypocrisy' in diplomacy.[52]

Instead, people enter into and sustain an interaction order with a variety of objectives in mind. Most are innocuous and mundane. A customer and a cashier may perform the ritual of a simple greeting ('Hi', 'How are you today?', and so on) or a nod or smile at the checkout of a supermarket to initiate a transaction; vows may be exchanged as a ritual to bring about a marriage; and so on. Other relationships, however, are more contentious. 'Very often behind community and consensus', Goffman asserts, 'are mixed motive games'. It may not be in an 'individual's interests… to personally uphold the niceties'.[53] Diplomatic relationships – certainly between foes but sometimes between friends as well – would belong more to the latter category. Instead of seeking to bond with a counterpart – as is often assumed in the aforementioned literature on face-to-face diplomacy[54] – a leader may set out to dominate a relationship.[55] As I elaborate below, their motives may be anything but benign.[56]

In such relationships, an interaction becomes 'less a scene of mutual considerateness than an arena in which a contest or match is held'. A leader is concerned with 'scoring as many points as possible against one's adversaries and making as many gains as possible for oneself'.[57] He achieves what are commonly known as 'one-upmanship' and 'putdowns' by manipulating his performance of a ritual, or refusing to perform it altogether. Rice's treatment of al-Bashir would be an example of the former: she shook hands with the Sudanese President, but did not smile. The American negotiators' refusal to even shake hands with the Bosnian Serbs in Belgrade exemplifies the latter. In both cases, the leaders transgressed the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom' and threatened the 'face' of their counterpart.

Fundamentally, leaders may resort to such 'aggressive use' of 'facework'[58] because they have the capacity to deliberate on how to perform – or at all – a ritual, bearing in mind the symbolism that invariably comes with it and is communicated to a counterpart.[59] Agency is exercised, but it is not freewheeling. The repertoire of rituals a leader may 'consider' to manipulate or violate goes only as far as what the

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[51]Goffman (1967, 11); see also Maseda (2017, 103–06); and Schimmelfennig (2002, 422).

[52]Krasner (1999).

[53]Goffman (1983, 5).

[54]Holmes and Wheeler (2020, 142) have called such 'focus on normatively desirable outcomes of intention-understanding and trust-building' a sign of the literature's 'positivity bias'.

[55]Ibid., 145–46.

[56]Goffman (1967, 12); see also Faizullaev (2017).

[57]Goffman (1967, 24).

[58]Ibid.; Collins (2004, 21–22).

[59]Of course, the corollary also stands – leaders are as empowered to initiate an 'aggression' as they are subject to it. Goffman (1983) notes: 'our ritual vulnerabilities are also our ritual resources… [T]here are enablements and risks inherent in co-bodily presence' (4).

guiding 'ceremonial idiom' prescribes. Interactions are always embedded in social structure. 'The idiom through which modes of proper ceremonial conduct are established necessarily creates ideally effective forms of desecration, for it is only in reference to specified proprieties that one can learn to appreciate what will be the worst possible form of behavior', Goffman explains. In reference to the religious origins of rituals (and to Durkheim), he proclaims: 'Profanations are to be expected, for every religious ceremony creates the possibility of a black mass'.[60]

To offer one recent example from international politics, when US President Barack Obama arrived at Hangzhou, China, for the G20 summit in September 2016, the Chinese did not provide him with a red-carpeted rolling staircase. He was forced to exit – unceremoniously – from the rear of Air Force One. Some Western diplomats considered Obama's (mis)treatment 'a calculated diplomatic snub' by the Chinese 'to make the Americans look diminished and weak' amidst growing frictions between the two countries.[61] It was against the backdrop of the guiding 'ceremonial idiom' – that is, a leader of Obama' stature deserved the 'red-carpet treatment' and nothing less – that made any deviation from or transgression of it meaningful.[62]

It should be noted, however, that such acts or events of 'ceremonial transgression' do not necessarily jeopardize an interaction order. They can be blatantly and overtly 'face-threatening', as in some of the episodes discussed in this paper. But more often, 'transgressions' are delivered under the cover of civility. A successful act or event, as Collins explains in his reading of Goffman, is one that is embedded within the flow of an interaction order, 'inserting double meanings so that on one level it remains appropriate'.[63] To preview an example I detail below, Khrushchev offered as a gift the model of a Soviet spacecraft to US President Dwight D. Eisenhower when he visited the White House in 1959. His attempt to demonstrate Soviet superiority in space through a gift – gracious and 'face-giving' on the surface – was not lost on the Americans. In situations like this, the target is confronted with three options: he returns the veiled transgression with one of his own, takes it in and therefore acquiesces to whatever message the leader has intended to send with his aggressive use of the ritual, or shatters the veneer of civility and severs the relationship (say, with a retort or even walking out). Save for the most extreme scenario, leaders rarely go for the final option. 'Put-downs and one-upmanship' are accomplished, Collins notes, 'when the onus for breaking the smooth playing out of the interaction goes to the recipient…'. However contentious a relationship, gains are subtly achieved (or in Goffman's language, points are scored) by 'manipulating' – rather than jettisoning altogether – 'the normal rituals of solidarity, deference, and situational propriety'. Such is the 'model of conflict' in Goffman's microsociology.[64]

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[60]Goffman (1967, 86).

[61]'Barack Obama "deliberately snubbed" by Chinese in chaotic arrival at G20', *The Guardian*, September 4, 2016.

[62]Goffman (1967, 51).

[63]Collins (2004, 21).

[64]Ibid., 21–22.

The international implications of interaction rituals

Why does it matter at all to our understanding of international politics that leader perform rituals, aggressively or not? In this section, I argue that as diplomatic practices, rituals are constitutive of the international relationship – bilateral or multilateral – that leaders to an interaction embody.[65] They are not just 'noise' whose explanatory significance dissipates as relations move 'up' from the interpersonal to the international. They have larger, structural implications.

Conventionally in IR, scholars have tended to think otherwise. The role of leaders and what they do to each other in diplomacy is often seen as epiphenomenal. Whatever impact an interaction between two leaders has on their international relationship is to a significant extent predetermined by the structural forces – material (their balance of power, interests, and so on) or ideational (intersubjective identities, shared norms, relative status, and so on) – in operation. Diplomatic outcomes do not depend much on *how* it is practiced, or *who* practices it. Such 'macro approach to diplomacy', as Faizullaev puts it, has led to the '*depersonification* of diplomatic activity'.[66] There is little room for agency to make a difference.

But as Solomon and Steele note recently, 'there is continuing broad dissatisfaction with grand or structural theory's value without "going down" to "lower levels" of analysis'. This is because it is only through interactions at 'lower levels' of analysis that structures are 'enacted and contested'.[67] Structural imperatives are always 'filtered through concrete practices'.[68] As Wendt notes, it is 'impossible for structures to have effects apart from the attributes and interactions of agents'.[69] Structure 'exists, has effects, and evolves only because of agents and their practices. All structure… is instantiated only in process'.[70]

On the one hand, structure may be 'enacted' through, among other processes, the performance of rituals at the interpersonal level. In the previous example at Potsdam, Truman, Stalin, and Churchill represented the three Allied countries of roughly equal standing, however structurally defined and intersubjectively understood (their relative power parity, shared identity as victors against fascism, legal status as sovereign states, contributions to the war effort, and so on). The simultaneous entrance of the three leaders into their meeting room was simply the symbolic enactment of – in this case – a relatively clear and uncontested understanding of their trilateral relationship. In doing so, to paraphrase Goffman, they 'celebrated' and 'confirmed' their relations to each other.[71]

Similarly, the USA might have been displeased with Sudan on Darfur, and with its overwhelming power, had the wherewithal to compel a change of behavior in the latter. But power does not 'speak for itself', as neorealism often assumes.[72] Their

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[65]Jackson and Nexon (1999); Sending, Pouliot, and Neumann (2015); Bjola (2013); Adler-Nissen and Pouliot (2014); Pouliot (2016).

[66]Faizullaev (2006, 498); emphasis original.

[67]Solomon and Steele (2017, 267).

[68]Ibid., 273.

[69]Wendt (1999, 12).

[70]Ibid., 185.

[71]Goffman (1967, 57).

[72]Rathbun (2007, 540).

leaders still needed to 'enact' such understanding of the US' position intersubject-ively when they came into personal contact. Counterfactually, had Rice embraced al-Bashir with an unreserved handshake and smile in their first meeting, or worse, an obsequious demeanor, the US position would have been construed very differently. Its relations with Sudan would probably have gone down a different path as well.

For sure, structural imperatives constrain what leaders may or may not do in their performance of rituals. By virtue of their disparity in power, the leader of the USA can – for any of the motives I discuss below – afford to refuse shaking hands with, say, the leader of Nauru (or Sudan, or the Bosnian Serbs), but much less so the other way around. To offer one recent example, at one point during the NATO summit meeting in Brussels in May 2017, the leaders were proceeding ceremoniously – side-by-side in a line, slowly – to a photo op. US President Donald Trump brusquely shove aside his Montenegrin counterpart, Duško Marković, and charged to the front. With his transgression of the 'ceremonial idiom' of summitry diplomacy, he might have hoped to express – symbolically – who was really in charge, that the USA and Montenegro (and other NATO members) were anything but equal. (Or, as I explain below, he might just be inclined by disposition to dominate others as individuals, rather than as representatives of their respective state.) He contested the symbol of equality among NATO leaders that their ongoing performance of the ritual – that is, proceeding side-by-side in a line, slowly, to the photo op – would otherwise have implied and supplanted it with one that enacted US preponderance. He could afford to transgress the 'ceremonial idiom', but only because the US was indeed powerful. As the leader of a much weaker country, Marković could only shrug off the incident.[73]

But even if structure constrains agency, leaders' performance of rituals is not predetermined. On the contrary, an aggression could give an international relationship a new meaning. Counterfactually, had any of the 'Big Three' leaders at Potsdam sought to contest their intersubjective understanding of equality, and insisted on a different arrangement for their entrance into meeting room that implied hierarchy – and even more so, had the other two leaders vehemently opposed, or in the other extreme, meekly caved in to it – their trilateral relationship would have be redefined there and then. How leaders behave in person, including their performance of rituals, matters to international politics. They possess the power to 'make relations'.[74]

Motives for aggression

International structure may be 'enacted' or 'contested' through the performance of rituals at the interpersonal level. But to begin with, why would leaders be inclined to transgress, instead of dutifully observe, the prevailing 'ceremonial idiom'? I suggest that they are often driven by one or some combination of three motives. Two of them are political in nature; the remaining one is more personal, but nevertheless have political consequences.

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[73]Schmidt (2017).
[74]Bjola (2013, 18).

To advance a particular understanding of one's international relationship

First, as is implied above, transgressions would be more likely when leaders' mutual understanding of their international relationship is unclear or incompatible. As such, they may be tempted to impose one's preferred understanding of it on one's counterpart – through rituals. As Sharp notes, diplomacy is in essence 'a discrete human practice constituted by the explicit construction, representation, negotiation, and manipulation of necessarily ambiguous identities'.[75] And '[t]he less obvious or "natural" the identities of the agents appear and the thinner the social context in which they operate', he posits, 'the more diplomacy is needed'.[76] For instance, in some of the episodes I discuss in this paper, extending (or refusing) a handshake, establishing (or not) eye contact, and even the careful design of the shape and size of a meeting table have been used aggressively to signify recognition (or not) of a counterpart – and, by extension, the country he represents – as a legitimate player.

Moreover, structural implications for a relationship – material or ideational – are often indeterminate. Scholars coming from diverse theoretical perspectives would agree. For instance, in whose favor is the balance of power between two adversaries – a central concept in realist theory – can be 'elusive'.[77] It would be up to the leaders in question to establish intersubjectively. The aggressive use of interaction rituals constitutes one such mechanism. Khrushchev's repeated attempts to insinuate at recent breakthroughs in Soviet space technology through his thought-out choice of gifts to his American counterparts, which I briefly discussed and shall elaborate below, is a case in point. In essence, he was striving to promote the understanding that the Soviet Union had 'caught up' in power and therefore to redefine intersubjectively the relationship of the two countries as one of power parity.

Similarly, constructivists and more recent studies informed by research in social psychology have highlighted how misalignment between one's self-identity and those prescribed by others can be a source of conflict.[78] The 'local' performance of interaction rituals would enable any misalignment to manifest, leading to its resolution, or conversely, the realization that a resolution is in fact unattainable.

An archetype of the latter would be the famous first encounter between George Macartney, Britain's first envoy to China, and the Qianlong Emperor on 14 September 1793. Chinese officials had expected Macartney, like other 'barbarians' who came to the Middle Kingdom, to kowtow before the Emperor. The ritual – longstanding and routine in the Chinese 'ceremonial idiom' – would be an acknowledgement of the Emperor's supreme status as the Son of Heaven. Macartney, however, believed that Britain was by then the world's foremost power. As a representative of his sovereign, George III, he would not behave in any way that implied British inferiority. He also refused to label the 'gifts' he brought along as 'tributes', as the Chinese had insisted. After weeks of communication and negotiation on how the ritual was to be performed – at times

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[75]Sharp (1999, 33).
[76]Ibid., 50.
[77]Wohlforth (1993).
[78]E.g. Hopf (1998, 174–77); Paul et al. (2014).

contentious, with proposals and counterproposals offered and rejected – a compromise was reached: instead of a kowtow, Maccartney would genuflect with one knee on the ground before the Emperor, as he would before his own sovereign at home.[79] It was a misalignment between the two powers' *subjective* understanding of their own identity *vis-à-vis* others – their standing and status in the world – that led to their conflict over something as seemingly trivial as how to ceremoniously begin a meeting. But it was also as a result of experiencing this conflict in person that the leaders on both sides came to realize *intersubjectively* how misaligned their self-identities indeed were.[80]

To register one's position

Leaders may also resort to the aggressive use of rituals when they wish to communicate a position on some disputed issue. The aforementioned episodes between Rice and al-Bashir (on Darfur) – and in some of the episodes discussed below, between Eisenhower and Khrushchev (on the American spy plane incident in May 1961), and between US President Bill Clinton and his Israeli and Palestinian counterparts (on a number of issues in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict) – would belong more to this second category of motive. The protagonists' objective remains political, because in the final analysis they are performing a transgression on behalf of their state (rather than themselves). Such aggressive use of rituals is possible, I argue, because it is 'costly' to a leader at both personal and interpersonal (dyadic) levels.

To begin with, to deny a counterpart the respect due to him threatens not only his 'face', but also a leader's 'image' in the eyes of others.[81] In Goffman's words, demeanor refers to 'that element of the individual's ceremonial behavior… which serves to express… that he is a person of certain desirable or undesirable qualities'.[82] A leader who refuses to shake hands, walks out of meetings, interrupts others in the middle of a speech or commits other lesser or graver 'misdemeanors' may be seen as rude and impolite. He who frequently violated the norms of proper diplomatic conduct may even find his ability to register a position curtailed because others would attribute his current act of ritualistic aggression more to his disposition than to his view on the disputed issue.[83]

Moreover, the aggressive use of rituals always carries the risk of 'retaliation' from one's counterpart, or worse, mutual 'escalation' to the point where, to paraphrase Holbrooke, outward cordiality turns into open animosity or even severance of the relationship in question. It is thus 'costly' as well at the interpersonal (dyadic) level. In rationalist language, then, it is a leader's readiness to incur 'costs' to his

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[79]Peyrefitte (1992, 102–06).

[80]Wendt (1999, 331).

[81]Goffman (1967, 50, 78).

[82]Ibid., 77.

[83]Wong (2019a, 193–94). Returning to Rice's episode with al-Bashir, that the Secretary of State did not smile was actually not so surprising. Over the years, she had developed a reputation for being prone (i.e. by disposition) to display a serious or even angry countenance. Those who worked for and were around her often had come to label it 'that look' (Kessler 2007, 9). Her effort to communicate US position on Darfur would presumably have been even more convincing had, counterfactually, she was known to be more buoyant, rendering her smileless handshake more the exception to the rule than the other way round.

personal 'image' and jeopardize the relationship with his aggressive use of rituals that makes his message – that is, the position he wishes to convey – 'credible'.

To boost one's ego

Finally, the discussion thus far has assumed that leaders are mere agents of their country, with limited room for personal feelings and character to influence conduct. 'Professional diplomats', as Jönsson and Hall note, 'experience the dilemma of having at least two personae: their own and that of the state that employs them'.[84] Leaders do (descriptively speaking) and should (normatively) think exclusively in the latter as representatives of their state. That is indeed a view – explicit or not – held across a wide range of academic fields: IR theory, diplomatic studies, diplomatic history, writings by practitioners themselves, and so on.[85] If a leader engages in an act of ritualistic aggression (for the motives outlined above), he does so exclusively in the interest of his polity, much like how a lawyer is supposed to act impersonally on behalf of his client. Conversely, if he becomes the target of aggression, it is not him *per se* who is being disrespected, or even humiliated, but his official capacity as a diplomat. Maccartney refused to perform the kowtow not because he considered the ritual an affront to him, but to his sovereign. The denial of the red-carpet treatment to Obama was scandalous, but only because he was then the President of the USA rather than a private citizen; and so on. As the saying goes, 'it's nothing personal'.

Recent research, however, is skeptical. Leaders, the argument goes, are not 'selfless vessels of the national interest'.[86] Like this rest of us, they possess 'emotions, temperament, character, dispositions, prejudices, and other attributes of a human being'.[87] They may be sensitive to the aggressive use of rituals by others targeted at their country (and occasionally engage in acts of aggression themselves on behalf of it). But as in other face-to-face contacts in life, diplomacy is also an occasion where leaders may be motivated – for egoistic reasons I outline shortly – to perform acts of 'personal (dis)respect' on others, and on the receiving end, find themselves vulnerable to them.[88]

Moreover, the two – political and personal motives for aggression – are often conflated. This is because leaders cannot insulate their persona of the state from that as an individual. Keys has labeled the view that they can the 'two-mind fallacy'. It is more an academic assumption – 'untested and unproven' – than an empirically accurate portrayal of how leaders' minds operate, of their motives in their treatment of each other.[89] An act of (dis)respect directed at a leader in his official capacity might as well be felt as directed at him personally. As the historian Frank Costigliola notes: 'It remains impossible to isolate what the precise impact of the

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[84]Jönsson and Hall (2005, 98).

[85]For an overview, see Keys (2020). For a pertinent example, see the literature in IR on how individuals come to experience collective (state) emotions (e.g. Hutchison and Bleiker 2014; Mercer 2014; Sasley 2011).

[86]Keys (2020, 21).

[87]Faizullaev (2006, 498).

[88]Wolf (2011, 119).

[89]Keys (2020, 6–7).

"personal" would be on a hypothesized, wholly impersonal "political" interaction – not that such could ever occur among human beings'.[90]

Hence, instead of being able to just leave their experience of personal (dis)respect (to oneself or others) 'at the door' as they carry out the business of their state, leaders admit it as a marker for the latter. As David Reynolds concludes in his study of summit diplomacy, 'most leaders find it hard to disentangle their country's national interests from their personal goals'.[91] Personal motives and feelings 'substantially influence' how national interests are 'defined and pursued'.[92] Leaders who have developed a personal bond through their collaborative performance of interaction rituals[93] would be inclined to consider an improvement in their international relationship natural and desirable. On the contrary, personal fallout from frequent ritualistic aggressions may dispose them to see their international relationship as antagonistic. The interpersonal becomes the international.[94] Personal motives for transgression therefore have political consequences.

What, then, account for such personal motives? Certain personality traits, by nature or nurture, may explain why some leaders are more inclined than others to engage in ritualistic aggressions, and conversely, to perceive acts by others as such. For instance, research in psychology has demonstrated that individuals vary in traits such as social dominance against out-groups,[95] narcissism,[96] need for power,[97] self-esteem instability,[98] and self-monitoring.[99] It may be hypothesized that leaders who score high on some of these traits are more likely to behave aggressively for egoistic reasons, such as to elevate one's status and esteem, to project a certain desired character (being resolute, in control, intelligent, and so on), to dominate, subjugate, or imply a counterpart to possess certain undesirable attributes (being irresolute, inexperienced, and so on).

Anecdotally, some of the 'worst' transgressors in face-to-face diplomacy would support such hypothesis. Trump would be an example of a leader who exhibits some of these traits, according to psychologists who have observed and studied him[100] and his followers[101] recently. His aggressive behavior toward other leaders may be driven more by the need to boost his ego than to advance US interests. Another case in point is Khrushchev. A report on his character produced by the CIA in 1961 concluded that the Soviet leader 'is endowed on occasion with considerable personal dignity'. He is 'sensitive to slights – real or imagined, direct or inferred – to himself, his political faith, or his nation, all of which he views more

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[90]Costigliola (2011, 3). It is beyond the scope of this paper to arbitrate on this debate. However, whether leaders are able to think in two minds and act exclusively in the interest of the state or instead inclined to have the two conflated may in fact vary by person. For a relevant discussion, see Rathbun (2019).

[91]Reynolds (2007, 429).

[92]Keys (2020, 2); see also Keys and Clarke (2019).

[93]Holmes and Wheeler (2020).

[94]Wheeler (2018, 1).

[95]Pratto et al. (1994).

[96]Ronningstam (2005).

[97]Winter (1973).

[98]Kernis (2005).

[99]Snyder (1974); see Yarhi-Milo (2018, 11–12) for a relevant discussion in IR.

[100]McAdams (2016).

[101]Womick et al. (2019).

or less interchangeably'.[102] Taubman, in his biography of Khrushchev, suggests that such trait of his – and as a result, his aggressive behavior in international summits – may be explained by the 'inferiority complex' he felt not only because of the Soviet Union's relative backwardness but also his humble peasant background.[103] How leaders with different personality traits interact to produce divergent outcomes is in fact '[o]ne of the crucial questions' that is currently 'undertheorized' in the study of face-to-face diplomacy.[104] Future research may address it.

The repertoire of interaction rituals

Because of their inherent symbolism, nearly all that transpire in an interaction – from what one wears and says to the shape of the room and the table around which the leaders meet – can become a site of aggression.[105] As Goffman puts it, in interpersonal contact, the 'acts or events, that is, the sign-vehicles or tokens which carry ceremonial messages, are remarkably various in character'.[106] Building loosely on his framework, I discuss in this section six broad categories of interaction rituals: the identity of leaders, gestural, spatial–physical, task-embedded, linguistic, and communication rules.[107] Along the way, I provide examples to demonstrate empirically their aggressive use in face-to-face diplomacy.

Identity of leaders

The first category of rituals that leaders may manipulate is whom to admit as parties to an interaction. As what Goffman calls a 'token', an individual can 'serve as a source of information which others can use in arriving at their assessment of the situation'.[108] By virtue of what an individual symbolizes (given his rank, status, role, gender, and so on) or even what his outfit signifies (whether he has properly dressed up or down for an occasion, in his official uniform or casually, and so on), his inclusion or exclusion can be taken advantage of to communicate a desired position or understanding of a relationship.[109] Moreover, diplomatic protocol dictates that parties to an interaction be composed of members with status and rank commensurate with their relative standing. That, also, can be part of a leader's ritualistic 'resource'.

Take, for instance, the 'tit-for-tat' that occurred at the Paris summit in May 1960. In the run-up to the summit, the Americans got wind of Khrushchev's plan to bring along his Minister of Defense, Rodion Malinovsky. According to Sherman Kent, then a US intelligence officer, the Americans suspected that

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[102]Bischof et al. (2014, 449–58).
[103]Taubman (2003, 426).
[104]Holmes (2019, 22).
[105]Faizullaev (2013).
[106]It is for this reason that the study of rituals in sociology has often been criticized for being 'overgeneralized' (Collins 2004, 15). I return in the conclusion to briefly discuss its implications for the current research.
[107]Goffman (1967, 55).
[108]Goffman (1969, 87–89).
[109]Faizullaev (2013, 94).

Khrushchev was hoping to present a hardline position ahead of possible negotiations (especially after the recent capture of an American U-2 spy plane over Soviet territory) – symbolically – through the inclusion of a defense minister, donned in his military uniform, in what was otherwise a peace summit. The move, in Goffman's terms, was 'face-threatening'. Not to be humiliated, Eisenhower decided in the final moment to take with him Thomas Gates, his Secretary of Defense, who was not part of the original American delegation.[110]

Moreover, it is not only whom a leader 'brings to the table' on his side that yields symbolic meaning, but also whom, from the other party, he 'grants' an audience. In July 2004, as the US National Security Advisor, Rice met with Chinese State Councilor Tang Jiaxuan, the country's most senior official responsible for foreign affairs. Rice found his tirade over US policy overbearing and offensive. So when she became the Secretary of State (and hence Tang's direct American counterpart) 8 months later and was planning her first visit to China in that capacity, she scheduled a meeting with Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing but deliberately held off confirming her intention to see Tang. Meeting Li but not Tang would threaten the latter's 'face', because Li was lower in the Chinese government hierarchy. After checking into her hotel in Beijing, Rice unexpectedly received a smorgasbord of Chinese delicacies – from Tang. According to US officials privy to the incident, confident that her suite was bugged, she mused out loud to her aides: 'What do you think?… Should I see him?' A meeting was finally scheduled, and Tang 'turned out to be extremely solicitous and eager to hear Rice's view'.[111] The decision on whom a leader engages given what their identities signify can be exploited to gain an upper hand in a relationship.

Gestural

Once leaders are in each other's physical presence, they have not 'officially' entered into an interaction until they perform the requisite rituals. They perform gestures such as a handshake, nod, or even simply the exchange of a direct, sustained eye contact. In doing so, they 'accredit each other as legitimate participants'. When such process of 'reciprocal ratification' has occurred, Goffman notes, the individuals are now 'in what might be called a *state of talk* – that is, they have declared themselves officially open to one another for purposes of spoken communication and guarantee together to maintain a flow of words'.[112]

But a leader's decision to 'ratify' an interaction is as meaningful as when he decides not to. When two individuals are only steps away, they 'are admirably placed to share a joint focus of attention, perceive that they do so, and perceive this perceiving'.[113] As such, they must act and react to each other one way or the other, with *some* meaning bound to be communicated.[114] An individual 'cannot decide to disdain the play or postpone it', Goffman explains, because 'his doing nothing itself

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[110]Kent (1972).
[111]Kessler (2007, 2).
[112]Goffman (1967, 34); emphasis original.
[113]Goffman (1983, 3).
[114]Goffman (1967, 51).

becomes, in effect, a choice and a course of action'.[115] He who 'does nothing' is in essence refusing to 'accredit' his counterpart. The latter is not 'recognized'; he is a 'nobody'.[116]

There are plenty of examples in international politics in which leaders consciously abstain from 'accrediting' a counterpart in order to make a point about their relationship. Famously, the Chinese considered US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' refusal to shake hands with Zhou Enlai (or even to acknowledge the latter's presence) when the two were just feet apart at the 1954 Geneva Conference a deliberate snub. He was letting it known that he refused to recognize the Chinese leader, and by extension, the communist regime he represented.[117] More recently, US Vice President Mike Pence and Kim Yo-jong, the sister of North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, were only an arm's length from each other at the opening ceremony of the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. They could not deny knowledge of their co-presence, yet they behaved as if the other was nonexistent. That there was no contact whatsoever – not even a flash of eye contact – was interpreted at the time that a direct contact between the two countries was not forthcoming.[118]

Furthermore, the meaning of a handshake, nod, eye contact, and other gestures is not binary. Even if a gesture is ritualistically performed, leaders may still manipulate the *manner* in which it is delivered – its concomitant bodily, facial and verbal content – to project a more nuanced understanding of a situation.[119] The 'awkward handshake' between Xi and Abe discussed earlier is illustrative. The ritual was nominally performed. But with their deadpan faces, avoidance of eye contact, and reticence, it was clear that neither was prepared for a thaw in their relationship. Rice's treatment of al-Bashir discussed above is another example.

Or, on the contrary, an interaction can be 'ratified' through the performance of other gestures, but a handshake – arguably the most basic of all 'accreditation rituals', in diplomacy or other more formal encounters – is conspicuously absent. In addition to the refusal by some members of the American team to shake hands with the Bosnian Serbs in Belgrade discussed earlier, consider Khrushchev's treatment of Eisenhower at the aforementioned Paris summit. Khrushchev was already in the room when Eisenhower entered for their first meeting. Khrushchev's foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, recalled how, in an effort to protest over the U-2 spy plane incident, the Soviet leader deliberately gave Eisenhower an 'icy stare' but did not reach out for his hand.[120] Khrushchev 'accredited' the President, but not in a positive sense.

Moreover, the calculated use of gestures occurs not only among adversaries, but also among alleged friends and allies. Consider the first meeting between Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron in Brussels in May 2017. At the time, the two countries were mired in tensions over Trump's decision to suspend talks on a US–EU trade agreement and to withdraw from the Paris Agreement on

[115]Goffman (1969, 114).
[116]Fuller (2003).
[117]Kirby (2004).
[118]Landler (2018).
[119]Goffman (1959, 35).
[120]Gromyko (1989, 171).

climate change. The two leaders shook hands for 6 seconds. 'Their knuckles turned white, their jaws clenched and their faces tightened', according to one reporter. 'Trump reached in first, but then he tried to release, twice, but Macron kept his grip until letting go'.[121] Macron's behavior was intentional, perhaps having learned from Trump's overpowering handshake with Abe[122] and his refusal to perform the ritual with German Chancellor Angela Merkel even upon her request[123] just 3 and 2 months earlier respectively. Macron later explained: 'My handshake with him, it's not innocent'. It was 'a moment of truth… We must show that we will not make small concessions, even symbolic'.[124] In short, such gestures are not 'mere' routine to initiate an interaction or void of meaning. However subtle, they are often employed by leaders to cast themselves in an advantageous position at the outset of an interaction. As Goffman argues, '[t]he gestures which we sometimes call empty are perhaps in fact the fullest things of all'.[125]

Spatial–physical

Leaders may also take advantage of how the venue of an interaction is spatially and physically set up.[126] As discussed, the ritualistic entrance of the 'Big Three' leaders into a room with three doors simultaneously at Potsdam was so arranged because it symbolized equality among the parties.

Consider also a spatial–physical feature of an interaction as seemingly trivial as the size and shape of the negotiation table.[127] The ritual of how leaders assemble, have themselves seated, and face each other can be highly contentious because of the understanding of a relationship it symbolizes. The status of a party can be conferred, denied, or simply implied as a result. For instance, the Paris peace talk in 1973 to end the Vietnam War was initially stalled because the belligerents disagreed on how to set up their first meeting. The South Vietnamese refused to share the same table with their northern counterparts because in their mind, doing so would confer them undue legitimacy. To overcome the impasse, the US delegation spent weeks sketching various table designs, with creative geometric proposals and counterproposals put forth by various parties, ranging from a broken parallelogram to a flattened eclipse.[128]

A table may also be customized to establish symbolically who has the right to speak, hence admitting certain parties to the interaction whereas discrediting others. Take as an example what US diplomat Christopher Hill dubbed the 'trick of the table' at the signing of the Agreed Basic Principle during the Bosnian War, on 8 September 1995. Before the meeting, US chief negotiator Richard Holbrooke dictated the exact size and shape of the table so that it could only

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[121]Rucker (2017).

[122]Horton (2017).

[123]Rothwell and Henderson (2017).

[124]'Macron sur sa poignée de main avec Trump: "Il faut montrer qu'on ne fera pas de petites concessions"', *Le Journal du Dimanche*, May 28, 2017.

[125]Goffman (1967, 91).

[126]Cicourel (1988, 258); Goffman (1959, 32–33, 98).

[127]Faizullaev (2013, 98).

[128]Herring (2001, 240).

accommodate the five Contact Group representatives (USA, UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia), a European Union negotiator, and the foreign ministers of Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia. The Bosnian Serb leaders would have to sit on the periphery. Holbrooke 'did not want any delegation to feel they had room to bring a second person to the table', Hill explained. Specifically, he wanted to deny the Bosnian Serb leaders a voice and have the Serbs to speak for them instead.[129]

Leaders may also bring in cultural considerations in their aggressive intent. At the beginning of the armistice negotiations in Kaesong to end the Korean War in July 1951, the United Nations team 'deliberately took the chairs on the north side' because they were aware of the Chinese tradition that 'the honored seats in a meeting are those that face south', that 'military victors sit in the northern chairs facing south and the vanquished in those facing north'. In doing so, a member of the UN team reminisced, 'the Americans felt they visibly discomforted the communists'.[130] They were hoping to define their relationship to their advantage by manipulating even the smallest and seemingly insignificant details of the interaction, before negotiations had even begun.

Task-embedded

The aggressive use of interaction rituals is also manifested through the performance of various tasks that are part of the interlocutors' 'facework'. Take, for instance, the exchange of gifts. Gifts are pregnant with meaning, generally in life but perhaps particularly in diplomacy.[131] In preparation for a meeting, leaders often put much thought into what they give each other. They are always mindful of what a gift symbolizes, and how it can be used to advance one's cause. As Thomas Fletcher concludes from his experience as a senior British diplomat, gifts 'have always been an essential element of statecraft'.[132]

Khrushchev's repeated effort to insinuate at Soviet power through gifts in his summits with American leaders is a case in point. As mentioned, he visited the USA in the fall of 1959. According to Oleg Troyanovsky, his foreign policy aide, Khrushchev wanted to present Eisenhower a model of the Lunik II upon arrival at Andrews Air Force Base on 19 September. Just 2 days earlier, the Soviet spacecraft was the first man-made object to land on the moon, beating the Americans. Khrushchev 'relished the thought of demonstrating' how 'the Soviet Union had outstripped the United States in space', Troyanovsky reminisced. The other Soviet leaders, however, were more cautious and 'protested that it would be a tactless gesture'. So after a 'lengthy discussion', a 'compromise' was reached: Khrushchev would present the model during his first meeting with the President at the White House. The 'transgression', however subtle, was obvious to the Americans. The President 'received the small sphere with a sour look on his face', Troyanovsky remembered.[133]

[129]Watkins and Rosegrant (2001, 247).
[130]Wilhelm Jr. (1994, 128).
[131]Faizullaev (2013, 109).
[132]Fletcher (2016, 73).
[133]Troyanovsky (2000, 217).

Privately, Eisenhower remarked to his son sarcastically, 'the fellow *might* have been sincere'.[134]

Kennedy attempted the same ploy when it was his turn to meet with Khrushchev in the aforementioned Vienna summit in June 1961. He decided to present the Soviet leader a replica of the USS *Constitution*. He explained to his lifelong friend, Lem Billings, that he wanted a gift that was 'meaningful'. The ship, he thought, represented the US in 1812, 'a young republic, strong, youthful, in love with freedom – exactly the kind of message I want to send Russia'.[135]

Khrushchev, meanwhile, had another plan in store. Months after the summit, the Kennedys received a dog in the White House. 'How did this dog get here?', the President asked his wife. Jacqueline Kennedy replied that during the state banquet on the first evening of Vienna, she inquired with Khrushchev about the status of Strelka, the first dog to be shot into space by the Soviets and safely returned to Earth less than a year ago. She said that perhaps she could be given one of its puppies, because, she explained to Kennedy, she 'was just running out of things to say'. To which Kennedy replied, 'You played right into his hands', because Khrushchev had always wanted to remind them of Soviet advantage in space technology.[136] In a letter that accompanied the dog, Khrushchev wrote to the Kennedys: '"Pushinka", a direct offspring of the well known cosmos-traveler "Strelka"'.[137]

Linguistic

The expectation that leaders conduct themselves in ways that sustain each other's 'face' – again, under normal circumstances – applies as much to how they behave as to what they say. In a ritualistic fashion, they exchange greetings, pleasantries, compliments, and other kinds of 'small talk' – even if they are anything but sincere.[138] Such expressions serve a practical purpose. As Goffman explains in the case of greetings between acquaintances, friends and foes alike, they are uttered to show that 'a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous coparticipation' and typically, that this relationship involves 'sufficient suppression of hostility for the participants temporarily to drop their guards and talk'.[139] Between strangers, 'small talk' eases the transition from the absence to the establishment of contact; it 'jump-starts' an interaction and 'lubricates' it thereafter.[140]

However, such linguistic rituals can also be used for aggressive purposes. To begin with, much like how leaders can disregard the ritual of shaking hands upon contact, they can also decline to observe the 'ceremonial idiom' of either initiating or reciprocating an instance of 'small talk'.

Take, for instance, the following meeting between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin at Camp David in September 1978. US President Jimmy Carter remembered how after some heated exchange,

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[134]Eisenhower (1974, 257); emphasis original.
[135]Collier and Horowitz (1984, 275).
[136]Kennedy (2011, 209).
[137]O'Donnell and Powers (1970, 340–41).
[138]Mitzen (2015, 116–18).
[139]Goffman (1967, 41).
[140]Coupland (2003).

Begin alleged nevertheless that he had 'complete confidence' in Sadat. However, Carter wrote in his memoir, 'it was quite conspicuous that Sadat did not make a similar statement in response'.[141] Sadat's non-response was 'conspicuous' – and therefore meaningful – not because he would have necessarily meant it had he also expressed confidence in Begin. Begin himself might not have been sincere to begin with. But a 'transgression' (against Begin's 'face') was committed because Sadat had refused to perform what was in essence an 'obligation' in any interpersonal – let alone diplomatic – contact, that is, to return a compliment. The ritual was initiated, but not consummated.

Moreover, greetings, pleasantries, and compliments may be good-natured on the surface. But like gifts, they can be performed for more sinister reasons. As Goffman notes, when two individuals are in talk with each other, there often exists in parallel 'an unofficial line of communication' – particularly through the use of what linguists call implicatures, innuendos and other forms of indirect speech[142] – to achieve, in Goffman's words, 'self-elevation' and 'other-derogation'. 'One upmanship' is achieved in a face-to-face interaction when one party is able to 'subtly… put itself in a favorable light' and subtly put the other party 'in an unfavorable one', often under 'the cover of verbal courtesies' that are nevertheless understood by all to be 'point[ing] in the other direction'.[143] A jibe, dig, or insult may be delivered in disguise.[144]

Consider, again, the exchange between Kennedy and Khrushchev at Vienna. When the two leaders first greeted each other, they exchanged 'badinage'[145] on how they once crossed paths during Khrushchev's 1959 tour of the USA. Khrushchev said he remembered meeting Kennedy, a senator then, but bantered that he had 'no opportunity to say much except hello and good-bye' because Kennedy had arrived late. He also remembered him as 'a young and rising man in politics', and joked that he would 'be happy to share his years with the President or change places with him'.[146] Over lunch, Khrushchev also proposed a toast 'to the President's health and said that he envied the President because he was so young'.[147] The subject of Kennedy's age was again raised in their second day of meetings. Khrushchev, as Reynolds put it, was 'jabbing away right up to the end'.[148]

Khrushchev's references to Kennedy's youth, congenial on the surface, were in fact implicatures that he lacked gravitas, and the Americans knew it. Dean Rusk, Kennedy's Secretary of State, remarked in his memoir that '[s]everal times… he [Khrushchev] referred to Kennedy's youth, and he never meant it as a compliment'.[149] When Kennedy returned to the American embassy after their first day of meetings – hence, in Goffman's language, back to his 'back stage' – he paced

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[141]Carter (1995, 355).
[142]Pinker, Nowak and Lee (2008).
[143]Goffman (1959, 187–88).
[144]Collins (2004, 22).
[145]Schlesinger (1965, 334).
[146]*Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961–1963, Vol. V, Doc. 83 (June 3, 1961).
[147]*Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1961–1963, Vol. V, Doc. 84 (June 3, 1961).
[148]Reynolds (2007, 209).
[149]Rusk (1990, 220).

around his room 'cursing at Khrushchev and at himself', and complained how Khrushchev had treated him 'like a little boy'.[150] Kennedy's intuition was correct. According to Khrushchev's interpreter, his comments to Kennedy were an attempt 'to put the "whippersnapper" in his place'.[151]

Communication rules

Finally, in interpersonal contact, people *normally* follow a number of ground rules that govern the flow of their conversation – who may speak (and speak first), be given the attention as the speaker, to speak for how long, and so on – and the way in which an interaction may be properly brought to a conclusion.[152] Such rules exist so that a conversation may proceed in a polite and orderly manner. They can be formal, as in the case of multilateral conferences and forums, where parties are allocated in advance a fixed amount of time to speak in a prescribed order and agendas are set beforehand.[153]

Or, these rules can be informal (as in our everyday conversations) and depend on the cultural context (such as the practice of deferring to the elders to speak first in more patriarchal societies). In such cases, a conversation is 'regulated', and 'faces' maintained, through the ritualistic performance of various 'clearance cues'. For instance, the question, 'I wonder what you think about the issue?', is partly rhetorical because it serves not only to communicate, literally, that its speaker is curious about his interlocutor's thought on an issue, but also to indicate, politely, that he is ready to 'yield the floor' and pass the 'right' to speak on to the latter. Similarly, the expressions, 'I cannot agree with you more…' or 'Sorry, but I will have to disagree…', may literally mean agreement or disagreement. But they are also conventionalized ways to politely indicate one's intention to chime in on a subject and be given the 'right' to speak. Interlocutors may also perform concomitantly various gestures, such as to raise one's hand slightly as others are speaking to show that one wishes to speak next, or to direct one's visual attention to an interlocutor as an 'invitation' to pick up on a conversation. As such, Goffman explains, '[i]nterruptions and lulls' are minimized 'so as not to disrupt the flow' and a 'particular ethos or emotional atmosphere is allowed to prevail. A polite accord is typically maintained'.[154]

But like the other categories of interaction rituals discussed, such ground rules can be intentionally violated. As in our everyday experience, a leader may *occasionally* interrupt a counterpart to communicate a stance more forcefully, or refuse to carry on with a conversation temporarily – hence, creating a lull (or in colloquial terms, an 'awkward silence') – as a sign of protest.[155] In Goffman's language, he has disrupted the flow of an interaction. Again, it is the fact that such transgressions

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[150]Reeves (1993, 166).

[151]Sukhodrev (2014, 356–58)

[152]Goffman (1967, 33–40).

[153]Cicourel (1988, 258).

[154]Goffman (1967, 35).

[155]For an example of repeated interruptions, see the heated exchange between Afghan President Hamid Karzai and his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf in the White House in Washington, DC, in September 2006, as recounted in Rice (2012, 444).

are more the exception than the norm that makes their occurrences now and then remarkable.

The aggressive use of such 'clearance cues' need not be blatant and overt, as is the case with an interruption or a lull. Instead, they may be taken advantage of subtly, again under the cover of civility. For example, during Henry Kissinger's historic secret visit to China in July 1971, Chinese leader Zhou Enlai insisted in their first meeting that Kissinger speak first because, he claimed, it was 'Chinese custom' to defer to the guest. However, the Americans in attendance suspected that Zhou was using it as a pretext to put Kissinger on the defensive, as the latter would be obliged to reveal American positions first and have them subject to discussion and challenge, whereas Zhou may – as the saying goes – keep his cards close to his chest.[156]

Consider, last, what may be called the 'withdrawal ritual'. A face-to-face interaction is what Goffman calls a 'naturally bounded unit'.[157] It begins 'when individuals recognize that they have moved into one another's immediate presence' and ends when there is 'an appreciated withdrawal from mutual participation'.[158] As in other realms of life, leaders are by default expected to bring an interaction to a close in an appropriate manner. Again, civility is the baseline: 'Once individuals enter a conversation they are obliged to continue it until they have the kind of basis for withdrawing that will neutralize the potentially offensive implications of taking leave of others'.[159]

The 'withdrawal rituals' individuals may perform to properly communicate one's intention to take leave may be verbal, ranging from the casual ('In any case, it has been nice talking to you…', 'Well, let's touch base again when you change your mind…') to the formal ('I hereby declare this meeting adjourned'). They may also be expressed in combination with certain behavior whose meanings are universally understood, such as taking out one's car key or packing up.[160] In their aggressive use, however, 'withdrawal rituals' may be exploited to advance the understanding that a leader is ready to break off an interaction, even in the absence of an agreement (say, in a negotiation). He is not so desperate.

As the chief US negotiator, Richard Holbrooke attempted such a gambit (but failed) at the Dayton Accords negotiation in November 1995. Toward the end of it, Holbrooke instructed his team to gather their packed luggage and place them at the parking lot where all parties could see. He later asked the US Air Force to put them on a truck. He did so to create the impression that the Americans, as host, were ready to shut down the negotiations. It would be in the interest of the contending parties to make the necessary concessions and sign onto an agreement, or risk leaving without any. However, Holbrooke wrote later, '[e]veryone saw through our bluff; nobody else made the slightest effort to prepare for departure'. The negotiations continued on.[161]

In more extreme scenarios, 'withdrawal rituals' may be deliberately flouted. 'Walking out' – or simply a threat to walk out – by definition refers to the abrupt

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[156]Xia (2006, 167).
[157]Goffman (1967, 35).
[158]Ibid., 99.
[159]Ibid., 120.
[160]Lebow (1996, 110).
[161]Holbrooke (1998, 293–94).

end of an interaction without the performance of any ritual. When a leader does that, he forces 'others into a ritually unsatisfactory state, leaving them to flounder in an interchange that cannot readily be completed'.[162] He creates what Goffman (and in everyday language) calls a 'scene', that is when 'an individual acts in such a way as to destroy or seriously threaten the polite appearance of consensus'. To show that he 'can no longer play the game of polite interaction', or that he 'no longer wants to do so', he 'confronts' his counterpart with a behavior that they both know is 'unacceptable'.[163] The behavior is overtly 'face-threatening', perhaps the most disruptive of all of the transgressions discussed so far because it directly severs (or threatens to sever) an interaction, if not the larger relationship. Such behavior is in fact rather common in international negotiations.[164] As US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright wrote, '[n]egotiations inevitably lead to some playacting. Sometimes… walking out is useful'.[165]

US President Bill Clinton exemplifies such aggressive use of withdrawal rituals. At one point during the negotiations over the Wye River Memorandum in October 1998, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu made a demand to his Palestinian counterpart, Yasser Arafat, that was flagrantly unacceptable (he asked that Arafat 'take care of' – i.e. execute – one prominent Palestinian and arrest many others in exchange for his concessions). That caused Clinton, as the mediator, to 'explode'. The President 'got up and stormed out, saying, 'This is outrageous. This is despicable. This is just chicken shit; I am not going to put up with this kind of bullshit".[166]

Clinton attempted the same gambit 2 years later at the Camp David summit in July 2000, again between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but with the latter being his target this time round. At one point, the President 'blew up' at Palestinian negotiator Abu Ala 'for not showing any flexibility on the question of borders'. 'Having made his point', Albright recalled, 'he motioned to me and we strode dramatically out – at precisely the moment a downpour began. It was either get wet or forfeit the drama of our exit, so we went and got drenched'.[167] He succeeded in both cases: Netanyahu and Abu Ala relented.

Conclusion and next steps

In summary, I argue that when leaders meet in person, they often consider *whether or not* to perform a repertoire of interaction rituals and *how* to perform them in a manner that is more strategic, calculated and contentious than extant theories of IR, particularly practice theory, generally assume. Their performance of such rituals can also be informative about intentions. That, I contend, runs contrary to what is implied under the 'cheap talk' paradigm. Furthermore, the explanation I have developed to make sense of the aggressive use of interaction rituals – based largely on the microsociological theory of Erving Goffman – is a timely complement to the

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[162]Goffman (1967, 24).
[163]Goffman (1959, 205).
[164]Kaufmann (1996, 146–47).
[165]Albright (2003, 620).
[166]Ibid., 317.
[167]Ibid., 491.

literature on the theories of communicative action/rhetorical coercion and more recent studies that focus on the role of behavioral cues in face-to-face diplomacy. Leaders resort to the aggressive use of rituals to realize a number of objectives, political and personal, with larger international consequences. I have offered over two dozen episodes across six categories of rituals to substantiate my argument.

That said, the current research may be advanced in several directions. I have already mentioned one, and that is the need to better understand how certain personality traits of leaders influence their proclivity for ritualistic aggression. To conclude, I outline two more.

First, as mentioned, the study of rituals has been criticized for being 'overgeneralized' in its definition of the term. Rituals 'are held to be omnipresent; but if everything is a ritual, what isn't?' Collins asks. He 'confesses' to be 'one of the worst sinners, proposing to see rituals almost everywhere'.[168] But clearly, not every 'act or event' that transpires between two leaders (for instance, when they jointly use a stapler or breathe in the same air in a room) has a 'symbolic component' (in Goffman's definition) or produces 'mutually focused emotion and attention' (Collins'), and may therefore be considered ritualistic. Where, then, do rituals begin and where they end? Perhaps more interestingly, what happens when leaders to an interaction interpret rituals or even consider what counts as a ritual differently?

Consider this last episode: US President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met for the first time in Geneva in November 1985. When Reagan moved outside of his lakeside chateau to greet his guest, Gorbachev was wrapped around in his coat, hat and scarf. Reagan, in contrast, wore a dark navy suit, which almost made him appeared to the 'the younger man', as Reynolds puts it.[169] According to Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador to the USA, Gorbachev did not like the symbolism contained in their contrasting outfits. He was furious at what he thought was Reagan's public relations coup.[170] In his account of the incident, however, Reagan's Chief of Staff Donald Regan noted that the move was innocuous. The President simply 'hated overcoats'.[171] If that was indeed the case, then offence was taken when none was intended. What counts as a ritual and the symbolism it contains may therefore very much be 'in the eye of the beholder', depending on, say, a leader's socio-cultural or personal background, rather than universal.

This brings me to the final point. Scholars have in recent years produced a number of fascinating case studies on face-to-face diplomacy. However, particular attention has been given to a handful of high-profile cases (perhaps because of the relative availability of primary and secondary sources): the interactions between British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and Hitler in 1938, between Gorbachev and his American counterparts in the late-1980s, and between other American and Soviet leaders during the Cold War.[172] This paper has presented

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[168]Collins (2004, 15).
[169]Reynolds (2007, 368–70).
[170]Dobrynin (1995, 587).
[171]Regan (1988, 304–05).
[172]See references in footnote 10.

historical and contemporary episodes from across geographical and cultural settings, and as such, broaden the literature's 'coverage'. But with a few exceptions, these episodes are still predominately derived from Western (particularly American) experience. There is no reason to believe that interaction rituals between leaders are any less impactful on international relations in other parts of the world.[173] It should not be assumed, however, that they matter to the same degree and in the same way across cultures, or between leaders from different backgrounds. These would be interesting topics to study moving forward.

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[173]For a recent study that illuminates the role of gift-giving in contexts as varied as ancient Near East and modern East Asia, see Kustermans (2019).

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