Veneers and Underlayments: Critical Moments and Situational Redefinition

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Surface agreements about the social definition of a situation, or what Erving Goffman calls veneers of consensus, are necessary for social interaction to be coherent. But why and when do social definitions change? In this article the author examines critical moments as points at which change may potentially take place. The author suggests that change is possible when a breach has occurred — an event, action, statement which is inconsistent with the current social definition. However, change depends on whether individuals ignore the breach, oppose it, or legitimize it. The author introduces the notion of an underlayment: the attitudes, that is, the beliefs, knowledge, preferences, and normative commitments individuals have about a particular social situation. He argues that whether a particular veneer of consensus will change in the face of a breach is determined, in part, by the underlayment that supports that veneer.

> Consensus is what many people say in chorus, but do not believe as individuals.
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> — Abba Eban

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As the quote by Abba Eban suggests, consensus is about "singing the same tune," not actually agreeing about what tune would be best to sing or what to think about the tune that is being sung. What Erving Goffman (1959) calls veneers of consensus or surface agreements are omnipresent. Individuals may behave as friends in public even though they hate each other. One may act as if they agree with a statement made by the host of a dinner party, even though they know it to be incorrect. One may compliment a colleague on a paper, even though they are far from convinced by his analysis.

For social interaction to be coherent in any context there must be, at some level, a shared and agreed-upon understanding of the situation, even though if one examined the individuals' actual beliefs and attitudes, the agreement might prove to be illusionary. In myriad ways and at numerous times, in agreeing with others, people say one thing though they believe another. They do that so social interaction may proceed in an orderly fashion.

But surface agreements can change. Someone may reveal their true feelings either intentionally or accidentally. When one individual states that they are not convinced by a particular analysis in a paper, they may discover that everyone finds the analysis questionable. Although veneers of consensus are necessary for social order, there is always the potential that they will break down.

This paper focuses on elements of a situation that are central to understanding why, when a particular understanding of a situation is challenged by a breach (a term that I discuss below), or using a more general term, a critical moment occurs, in some cases the situation is redefined and in others it isn't. I primarily focus on small group dynamics, though my intent is that the insights here be relevant to understanding how public/societal understandings of situations change as well. I briefly explore these latter implications in a later section of the paper.

In my analysis I examine three components of a group. The first is what Goffman (1959) has called "the veneer of consensus" that defines the normative rules and symbolic context within which a group's interactions play out. The second is what I term the "underlayment," the set of individual attitudes, beliefs, and preferences behind the group's veneer of consensus and individuals' knowledge of each other attitudes. The third is the "glue" that connects the veneer and the underlayment, which I use metaphorically to refer to the set of interactions that come to connect a group's underlayment to its veneer of shared understanding.

Although I rely heavily on Goffman's metaphor of a "veneer," my intent with the concept of an "underlayment" is to point to very non-Goffman-like aspects of group dynamics. Whereas Goffman focuses on the dramaturgical aspects of group interaction and its implicit rules, I want to point to the importance of what is below the surface in terms of people's values and beliefs. I use the term underlayment to point to the beliefs, knowledge, and preferences that "support" the observed surface structure of interaction. However, in pointing to the importance for group interaction of what is in people's heads, I do not want in any way to suggest that either what is in people's heads is at all coherent, or that it is what is in their heads that is determinative of group interaction. This is the mistake made by rational choice theory in its assumption that people's preferences are coherent and that their preferences along with contextual constraints determine individual behavior (Douglas and Ney 1998). That said, I do want to argue that it is equally problematic to totally ignore what is in people's heads.

An example of a point at which a change in a group's understanding of itself is found in the biblical story of Esau and Jacob. After Jacob disguises himself as Esau and tricks his father into giving him, as opposed to Esau, his blessing, Esau wants to kill Jacob. Jacob flees and they do not meet again for many years. When Jacob hears that his brother is coming to meet him, he fears that Esau still intends to kill him. When they meet, however, Esau greets him, they embrace, and in doing so redefine the situation not as an opportunity for murder, but as an expression of brotherly love. At that critical moment, the meaning of Esau and Jacob's encounter is totally changed. The embrace is accepted, and both brothers weep. The new definition of their situation/relationship is secure.

This simple story nicely illustrates how the definition of a situation — perhaps more accurately the definition a relationship — can change. Earlier in the story Esau and Jacob understand each other as competitors. Furthermore, Esau sees Jacob as a trickster and someone not to be trusted because at an even earlier point, Jacob has tricked Esau out of his birthright by getting Esau when he is hungry to trade it for a bowl of soup.

The breach here is Esau's greeting of Jacob, an action that is inconsistent with the assumption that Esau is out for revenge. The greeting points to an alternative interpretation of Esau and Jacob's relationship — that they are brothers who love each other. In embracing each other and weeping together, the new definition of the situation takes hold. If instead Jacob had rejected his brother's embrace, Esau might well have taken offense, in turn reinforcing the old interpretation of their relationship as being based on competition and distrust. The consequence may have been revenge instead of reconciliation.

What we see here is a situation where two individuals have had a particular understanding of their relationship. One individual breaches that understanding and that breach suggests a different understanding of their relationship. The other individual accepts the new definition by interacting in a way consistent with the new definition of the situation, but inconsistent with the old definition. A critical moment caused by a breach has led to a redefinition of the two individuals' situation or relationship.

Conceptual Overview

In his classic 1959 work, *The Presentation of Self in Every Day Life*, Erving Goffman describes the need for individuals to support a "surface agreement" or a "veneer of consensus" in order to make coherent interaction possible. Goffman argues that individuals' definition of a situation must be sufficiently similar that "open contradictions do not occur." He states that this consensus is achieved by each individual suppressing their own feelings and ideas so that a common, shared definition of the situation is supported. It is then through this shared definition that individuals are able to create what Goffman calls an "interactional *modus vivendi*" (Goffman 1959).

Veneers of consensus or surface agreements are, of course, omnipresent. For social interaction to be coherent in any context there must, at some level, be a shared understanding of the situation. In the case of the hotly contested 2000 election, if members of Congress and/or the media had chosen to aggressively dispute the legitimacy of the election of George W. Bush as President, the country could have been thrown into political chaos. However, as Goffman's use of the phrases "veneer of consensus" and "surface agreement" suggests, there may not be actual or true agreement in a particular situation.

Of course, "public lies" are a common daily occurrence (Kuran 1997). In order to avoid hurting feelings, we may tell a friend that a dinner they cooked was terrific even though it was uneatable. Upon meeting a fellow department member in the hall, we may treat them collegially, despite having had a knock-down argument with them the week before about a senior hire. In a myriad of times and places, we present ourselves and interact with others in a manner that is inconsistent with our "true" beliefs and feelings.

Key to my analysis is the concept of the "underlayment" of a consensus or an agreement. In furniture making a veneer is a thin piece of a typically very high quality wood that is glued to a far thicker, lower quality piece of wood that serves as its underlayment. The very best furniture is built this way as opposed to solid single pieces of wood, as the wood that serves as an underlayment provides greater stability and insures against warping. One of the differences between high quality and low quality furniture is the nature of the underlayment. Inexpensive furniture will use cheap particle board. Expensive furniture will use actual wood or very high quality particle board.

Similarly, in the building trades, the underlayment is the subflooring that supports the actual walked-on flooring in a room. It is the base that the final flooring is laid over. It might be concrete — very solid, but not at all forgiving under foot; it might be plywood — strong if it is thick enough, and yet flexible; or it might consist of individual boards of pine — quite flexible and forgiving, but also potentially creaky and weak.

Whether we are talking about a veneer of wood or the flooring in a room, the importance of the underlayment is that it determines the strength of the veneer or flooring that it supports. When the veneer of a piece of furniture is bumped hard, it is the quality of the underlayment that in good part determines whether the veneer will crack. Similarly, when a floor is walked on or jumped on by a particularly heavy person, whether it cracks and breaks in part is determined by whether its underlayment consists of concrete or thin pine boards.

I use the metaphor of an underlayment to ask what is behind or supports the veneer of consensus or surface agreement of a particular interactional situation. As in the case of a piece of furniture or an actual floor, I argue that the nature of the underlayment to an agreement critically affects the sturdiness of the surface agreement. Of course, the underlayment for most pieces of furniture and most floors are sufficiently sturdy that they adequately support their surfaces under normal circumstances. This, however, may not be the case with the veneer and surface agreement in many social situations. Rather, people's shared understanding may be quite fragile and tentative, that is, the underlayment to their shared understanding may be quite weak. Modest "bumps" may well have substantial effects, leading to either a lack of shared understanding or a different understanding. As I will describe in greater detail, consensus or surface agreements can be supported by quite different underlying situations or underlayments.

In my view, underlayments consist of the beliefs, values, knowledge, preferences, and normative commitments of the individuals in the group. I will generically term these attitudes. They need not be coherent at the level of the individual. Individuals may well have ambiguous, ambivalent, or inconsistent attitudes about their interaction situation. However, what interaction requires is coherence at the group level, not the level of the individual. To revisit Abba Eban's metaphor I may have conflicting or confused preferences about what song to sing. I and others may not be happy with the song that is being sung. What is critical, however, is that we should be willing to sing the song that is being sung.

A key aspect of the underlayment is the knowledge individuals have of each others' attitudes. In particular, individuals may or may not be aware of the degree that different individuals support the group's surface agreement. When a particular surface agreement is challenged by new facts or new proposed interpretations, the effect of that challenge will typically depend critically on both whether the participants are in fact in full agreement about the current interpretation of the situation and the degree to which they are aware of the degree they actually concur with the surface agreement. This later knowledge or its absence may be critical in determining whether a situation is redefined.

Analyzing the underlayment to a consensus in terms of the degree of actual agreement between individuals, however, is not sufficient. When a

situation might potentially be redefined, individuals do not generally vote on whether they like the new or old interpretation better. A surface agreement is not simply the aggregation of individual attitudes. Rather, it is through the interactions of individuals that either the old definition is maintained or a new one comes to replace it. Although this stretches the metaphor some, I think of the interactions in a group as the "glue" that either succeeds or fails in connecting a particular veneer of consensus to its underlayment.

As noted previously, there may be a point at which a group's understanding of itself might be redefined as a critical moment. Critical moments are points at which a group's veneer of consensus or surface agreement *might* change. This raises two questions. What are the elements of a situation that are relevant to understanding why the definition of a group potentially changes? And which elements are critical to understanding why the definition sometimes changes, but not in others? My goal is to offer a partial answer to these questions.

In this article, I focus in particular on the role of breaches, which can be any occurrence of behavior, revelation of fact, or offered interpretative claim that is inconsistent with the current definition of the situation and points to a different understanding of that situation. Precisely because they point to a different definition of a situation, breaches have the potential to change the definition of the situation. I argue that the key to comprehending how and when the definition of situation changes is understanding how breaches are managed. Furthermore, what is critical to understanding how breaches are managed is the underlayment to an agreement or a consensus.

Veneers of Consensus

Goffman's use of the phrases "veneer of consensus" and "surface agreement" points to the possibility that a group of individuals' publicly expressed understanding of their situation may differ quite radically from their individual private understandings. The classic child's story *The Emperor's New Clothes* illustrates one such case. Interestingly, variants of this story occur in many different cultures.

The story begins as two swindlers come to the emperor's city. They pretend to be weavers and claim to know how to make the finest clothes imaginable. The clothing, however, has the property that it is invisible to anyone who is either stupid or incompetent. The swindlers "make" the emperor a new set of "clothing" and assure that the entire city knows of the wardrobe's mystical properties. Then, as part of a formal procession, the emperor parades through the city in his new clothes. Everyone acts *as if* the emperor is dressed in the finest set of new clothes anyone has ever seen until a small child blurts out that the emperor has nothing on. Everyone then openly acknowledges the fact the emperor has no clothes. The emperor shudders, recognizing that they are right, but he continues the procession, carrying himself even more proudly than before.

It is possible to read this story in a number of different ways. From a child's perspective it is a wonderful account of how children are wiser and braver than adults in their willingness to declare things as they really are. It also indicates that, what adults profess to be true, either in terms of what they say or indirectly through their behavior, may in fact not be so. Adults, however, may read this story as containing valuable lessons for children.

It is, in part, a story about how social etiquette requires us not to comment on what appears to be true. We are obliged to support the surface agreement whether or not it is in fact "true." Put more poignantly, the story points out to the child the need to negotiate between what one believes and the shared public understanding of the situation one participates in. In most situations, it is not normatively permissible to simply say what one is thinking. Parents of young children know this is something that they must teach their children if they want to avoid publicly embarrassing situations with their child.

Underlayments: The Support for the Veneer of Group Agreement

How are we to understand the relationship between what individuals personally "believe" and the public surface agreement that they subscribe to in a particular interaction situation? I propose the concept of an "underlayment" to describe that which supports, in Goffman's terms, the veneer of consensus or surface agreement in a group. An underlayment consists of beliefs, values, knowledge, preferences, and normative commitments, what I will call individual attitudes within the group with respect to a particular situational definition.

We can distinguish three dimensions of an individual's attitude with respect to a public definition of a situation: (1) an individual may believe that the public definition of the situation is factually correct or not; let us call this *factual correctness*; (2) they may believe that the normative definition of the situation is appropriate or not; let us call this *normative appropriateness*; and (3) they may find a particular definition of a situation as desirable or not; let us call this *individually desirable*. In each of these three cases, an individual may either hold contradictory attitudes and/or be unsure of what constitutes their overall attitude.

The possible attitude combinations are myriad and so it may be very difficult for individuals in any particular situation to know the actual attitudes of others toward and in that same situation. If individuals know each other well, they may be able to accurately assess what others think. The opportunities that individuals have to speak to each other outside of the surface agreement can be an important determinant of the degree to which an individual's "public" performance is understood by others. More importantly, an individual's assessment of others' attitudes toward a situation may

have substantial effects on that individual's willingness, either in words or deeds, to proffer a new definition of the situation.

Breaches as Critical Moments

For the purposes of this essay, I define a critical moment as a point in the interaction when there is a possibility that the group's definition or understanding of the situation might change. Here I explore the importance of breaches in creating critical moments. By "breach," I mean any incident where something occurs that is inconsistent with the group's current understanding of itself. As an example, consider Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and his relationship with Israeli settlers in the West Bank in the spring of 2003.

Historically, Sharon had been the settlers' most ardent supporter. He had guaranteed that they would be able to stay in the West Bank for generations. However, in a meeting with fellow Likud members on May 23, 2003, Sharon repeatedly referred to the Israeli presence in the West Bank as an "occupation." In using this term, Sharon explicitly denied Israel's legitimate right to annex the West Bank — the settlers' long-term, long-held dream. The uproar was immediate. While some attempted to reinterpret Sharon's use of the term "occupation" in a way consistent with his previous position, others accused him of being a traitor (*New York Times*, June 1, 2003, "Sharon Laments 'Occupation' and Israeli Settlers Shudder").

The fact that Sharon made this comment just prior to President George W. Bush's visit was certainly intentional. Sharon was signaling both to Bush and to the settlers a new position on the settlements. In fact, after the two leaders met, Sharon announced that he would immediately begin the removal of the illegal settlements. However, he subsequently backed off this commitment, arguing that there was no requirement for Israel to do anything about illegal settlements until Palestinian violence stopped.

Breaches may occur for any number of reasons: A student, who is assumed to be brilliant, receives a very poor grade on a test; an individual discovers that their spouse is having an affair; a person in a group decides to interject a different understanding of the situation. In some cases, breaches may occur for reasons exogenous to the group's interactions. For instance, a particular fact is revealed. In other cases, breaches may occur as individuals strategically seek to change a group's understanding of itself.

My focus in this essay is not in why breaches occur, but rather, the response they evoke. It is the response to the breach that determines whether a new definition of the situation is adopted or the old definition is maintained. Responses to a breach may seek to reinforce the existing definition of the situation. Strategies to maintain status quo include:

- Ignore the breach: Treat it as if it did not happen.
- Redefine or delegitimize the breach. For example, in the Sharon case, there was an attempt to argue that he was only talking about people, not the land.
- Dismiss the breach as being inappropriate, undesirable, or untrue.

An individual may engage in actions to support the proffered new definition of the situation. This can be done in a number of ways:

- An individual may act in a way consistent with the new definition. Thus, when Esau greets Jacob he embraces him.
- An individual may openly support the definition: "That is a great idea."
- An individual may simply communicate through their body language or expression that a breach has occurred. If there is an expressed recognition that others are aware a breach has occurred, then the breach becomes a fact that the group must address.

Of course individuals may choose not to take a position one way or the other. Whatever they do, however, their actions (or lack thereof) define a public position with respect to both the old definition of the situation and the proffered new definition. Their actions not only support or undermine others' behavior, but constitute a public statement about their values and commitments.

Breaches, Responses, and Situational Redefinition

At the simplest level, when a breach occurs, individuals may respond by resisting the breach, supporting it, or deferring on taking a position. As I have already noted, individuals' attitudes toward any definition of a situation reflect perceptions of its factual correctness, normative appropriateness, and personal desirability; and that individuals may hold attitudes that are simultaneously inconsistent and vary in their strength. In many situations, coherence may not exist.

To the degree that individuals' attitudes toward either the current definition of the situation are coherent and consistent and are similarly so for the new proffered definition, it may be easy to predict how they will act when a breach occurs. For example, in the story of the emperor's new clothes, we assume that individuals find it undesirable to be seen as stupid or incompetent but do not have a particularly strong commitment to believing whether their emperor is naked or not. In the story of Jacob and Esau, we are to assume that Jacob prefers to believe that Esau loves him than that he wants to kill him. In many situations people's attitudes may be sufficiently complex that it is impossible to predict what they will do. Failure to support a new definition can often appear to be support for the status quo.

When a new definition of a situation is proposed, what are the possible outcomes? All individuals may decide to reject it, allowing the old defi-

nition to stand. A second possibility is that all individuals act in such a way as to support the new proffered definition. In this case, the new definition of the situation becomes the surface agreement of the situation. The story of the emperor's new clothes is an example of this.

What about the cases along the spectrum? One possibility is that a significant number of individuals reject the definition, but another substantial number accept it. In this case, there is likely to be open conflict about the definition of the situation. This could have occurred in the 2000 election if a significant component of the media and Congress had continued to contest Bush's election.

A third possibility is that while a few individuals will openly reject the new definition, most individuals will not take a position, and the assumption will be that all or most of the individuals continue to support the current definition. Alternatively, a few individuals may openly support the new definition, while others will not take a position. Here it will be ambiguous to the group as to whether the new definition has been accepted. Depending on the situation, others may believe it is desirable to keep the situation ambiguous, or alternatively, they may seek clarification, for instance, asking, "Is this what we all think?"

Veneers, Underlayments, and Glue

We are now in a position to examine how all three pieces of our model potentially fit together. Consider again the story of the emperor's new clothes.

The story of the emperor's new clothes only works because everyone in the story, except the child, believes that they are possibly incompetent or stupid. It is particularly important that the emperor believes that this may be true of himself, but it is necessary that all the individuals believe that this may be true of themselves as well. They see the emperor as naked and the reason for their not announcing this is that it will reveal that they *in fact* are either stupid or incompetent. Thus, at the level of particular individuals — the underlayment — it is essential that they have specific beliefs if the initial veneer of consensus that the king is elegantly dressed is to be maintained. However, note that it is critical that neither the emperor nor anyone else knows that others cannot see his clothes. All it takes is for individuals to realize that the child sees the emperor as naked to create a cascade of changed opinions (Granovetter 1978).

The fact that the emperor recognizes the truth, but continues to act as if he is elegantly dressed, is also of interest. Because it is normatively unacceptable for the emperor to ride through town naked, his only alternative is to act in a way that is consistent with the old understanding. He must reject the new definition of the situation as it offers no acceptable explanation for his behavior. Thus, even though he realizes that he is naked and that everyone else knows that he is naked, he must continue to pretend that he is elegantly dressed. Of course, the emperor and the city's citizens have all demonstrated that they are stupid and incompetent in letting themselves be fooled by the swindlers.

The story might have been told in a slightly different way that would make it more directly into a piece of political satire with a despotic ruler. In this case, the townspeople might well have not said anything about the emperor being naked for fear of their lives. It would be the emperor's considerable political power and willingness to using it that would cause the public to support a surface agreement that acknowledges the nonexistent wardrobe. When the child cried out, we would expect the mother to scurry the child out of view while everyone else ignored the child's outburst. Of course, this is not the actual story. The original story asks us to realize that individuals, when confronted with an authority that in fact is incompetent, can make this public if they are all willing to make the claim together.

Politics and the Construction of Legitimacy

It is my hope that the model developed in this essay will provide insight not only into small group interaction, but into macro-political processes as well. The model we have created here relates to the concept of social legitimacy outlined by David Beetham in his 1991 book, *The Legitimation of Power*. The book provides a conceptual schema for assessing the legitimacy of a process of political interaction.

Beetham defines three different types of legitimacy: rule-based, belief, and consensual, which he sees in any situation as being potentially in tension with each other. Rule-based legitimacy for Beetham simply refers to whether a situation is consistent with some set of rules or laws that define what is appropriate or legitimate. For example, one could assess whether the 2000 Presidential election was legitimate by examining whether the required procedures were followed.

The second notion of legitimacy that Beetham examines belongs to renowned sociologist Max Weber, that legitimacy is based on individuals' belief that a particular institutional configuration is legitimate. Legitimacy is thus defined with respect to the particular cultural norms of a society and individuals' understanding of those norms.

Beetham is most interested in the idea of legitimacy as being something that is created consensually in the process of social interaction. He points to the fact that individuals confer legitimacy on each other or an institution through their behavior. In the language of the model we have explored in this essay, by acting in a way that is consistent with a group's veneer or surface agreement, individuals confer legitimacy on that agreement — whether or not they believe that a particular situation/institution is legitimate or consistent with some set of rules.

The key point in Beetham's argument is that what is politically consequential is whether legitimacy is socially conferred. Beetham's is concerned

with how it is that a superordinate group can legitimately have power over a subordinate group, given that the social conferral of that legitimacy may be coerced. The analysis in this essay suggests that the relationship between any surface agreement and the implicit conferral of legitimacy in a group and the underlayment of attitudes and beliefs of its members may be less than direct and may also be determined to a great degree by patterns of past inactions, what I have termed the "glue." Another key issue concerns people's knowledge or presumptions about the positions of other individuals. It suggests that a much more nuanced analysis of how legitimacy is socially conferred is needed.

Conclusion

What Goffman has termed "surface agreements" or "veneers of consensus" control the interactions we engage in throughout our lives. Interaction can only be interpreted and understood in the context of a situational definition. As such, situational definitions — veneer of consensus or surface agreements — are of tremendous importance in that they determine the roles and status of different individuals, who has power, and the symbolic meaning assigned to different individuals' behavior. Given their importance, it is critical to ask how and why they change.

In this essay, I have argued that any theory that attempts to answer this question needs to consider two major factors. First is what I have called the "underlayment" that supports an agreement. I have conceptualized this underlayment as consisting of individuals' beliefs, values, knowledge, and normative commitments with respect to a situation. Of particular importance is an individual's knowledge or, more importantly, their lack of knowledge of the attitudes of others in the group to different situational definitions. Second, I have argued that in order to understand how any particular underlayment connects to a group's observed veneer of consensus, one must examine the sequence of interactions around a breach, what I have called the "glue."

Of course, any metaphor has its limitations. The metaphor of a veneer and underlayment elides the ongoing dynamic nature of social interaction. It also fails in that, after a hard blow, a veneer may only crack; but after a breach, a surface agreement potentially transforms from one shared understanding to another.

Despite these limitations, the metaphor of a veneer of consensus and an underlayment importantly points to the fact that a transformation in a surface agreement cannot be understood by simply analyzing what has occurred on the "surface." Rather, what supports that surface agreement — its underlayment — is critical to understanding how it may or may not be transformed by a specific breach. To return to the Eban quote that opens this essay, we need to examine both what people say and what they believe if we are to understand changes in situational definitions.

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