THE PRESENTATION OF SELF THROUGH SURROGATES IN LATIN-AMERICAN LIFE[1]

Octavio Romano
Behavioral Sciences Division
School of Public Health
University of California, Berkeley

Throughout Latin-American life, and among the people of Mexican descent in the United States, people often use personal intermediaries when they intend to deal with others. Such interpersonal activity is brought into play in a relatively wide variety of situations which call for particular kinds of communications and calculated negotiations. This aspect of Latin-American social interaction has been commented upon by many writers, as, for example, Oscar Lewis who has written that, ". . . although Teopztecans are turned within themselves, they are not dreamers. They are an indirect people; they frequently rely upon the use of intermediaries and upon formality" (1951: 418, my emphasis).

Much along the same lines, George Foster has written that, "Basic to an understanding of the patron-client relationship . . ." in Tzintzuntzan, ". . . is the concept of a palanca, or lever. A palanca, then, is a go-between" (1963:1292). Foster then goes on to say that god-parents, co-parents, friends, and saints are among the many who at one time or another perform the role of go-between.

Perhaps the most widely known social situation in which Latin-Americans use the device of a go-between concerns the ubiquitous matrimonial intermediaries who lend themselves as temporary liaisons between a prospective groom and his desired girl's family. In her recent paper, "Opposition and Alliance in a Mexican Town," May Nordquist Diaz has extensively discussed such inter-familial negotiations. She has written that, in negotiations between two families with matrimony in mind, ". . . the ceremonies resemble diplomatic proceedings between two sovereign and distinct units. Direct communication can take place only with the help of a mediator; often it could not take place at all without the tact and the manipulations of a practiced diplomat, for the affinal groups are expected to be not only distant but openly hostile as well" (1964:184, my emphasis).

In the course of doing field work in Frontera, Texas, I was asked to be a matrimonial intermediary, portador in the local language, along with a Señor Lopez, the local resident who was most often asked to perform such tasks. The following, from field notes, is an abbreviated account of that experience.

During the afternoon, Señor Lopez came over and asked me if I had anything planned for that evening. I replied that I didn't, and he then said with a smile that someone wanted him and me to go ask for a girl's hand. We arranged to meet at seven-thirty that evening. Later, Señor Lopez arrived with another man of some 35 years of age who turned out to be the brother of the boy making the request through us. Our goal was a community about fifteen miles to the west of Frontera, but our first stop was in Frontera itself, at the Tecolote Bar where the older brother of the prospective groom bought some

beer for the portadores. "This is to take the fear away, and to give you courage," he said. While drinking the beer on the way, Señor Lopez asked a series of casually detailed questions concerning the length of time the couple had known each other, whether or not they were in accord with our mission, and whether or not the girl's family knew that we were to visit that evening. In addition, Señor Lopez inquired about the boy's work and his general economic situation. This was followed by a few questions concerning the length of the courtship. When the older brother had replied to all of the questions, Señor Lopez repeated that he certainly wished that all had been properly arranged and that we would not all get thrown out of the girl's house. Everyone laughed somewhat nervously.

A short while later, Señor Lopez asked the older brother to repeat all of the essential information once more. General nervousness prevailed, and more jokes were made about getting thrown out of the house. Upon arriving we drove to a small house in front of which two brothers of the girl were conversing. We were asked to enter. The mother, since the father was deceased, came out to receive us in the living room of the three room house. She and her oldest son remained in the living room. We talked with them.

For the better part of the first half hour, the conversation was more or less conventional, covering such topics as the weather, the recent rains, the crops, and prospects for work. This was followed by a fairly detailed, but seemingly very casual, account of the memberships of the two families involved. Throughout the conversation we deferred to the hosts. Finally, Señor Lopez moved to a chair near the older brother of the girl and addressed himself to him, not to the mother. In a semi-formal language he explained our mission. His message was interspersed with formalistic and ritualistic phrases extolling the virtues of matrimony from both the secular and the religious points of view. The mother and her oldest son listened without interruption until he was through. They then excused themselves and left for the next room, presumably to confer and to check with the daughter. We remained sitting without saying a word for some ten minutes. The mother and son returned to inform Señor Lopez that they would take the matter into consideration. Señor Lopez inquired about a possible date upon which we could return for their answer. The older son said, "Do not trouble yourselves to travel this far. We will go see you in Frontera in fifteen days." This agreed upon, the visit ended and we walked outside, the mother remaining indoors. The girl whose hand had been requested had not come into the room during the entire visit. Then the portadores and the girl's older brother went to a bar for a beer. Talk about the visit and our purpose there was completely avoided in the presence of the girl's brother.

On the way home everybody noticeably relaxed and joked about how well the visit had come off, and how well we had been received. When I asked Señor Lopez for his judgment of the possible results he said, "Well, like the Americanos say, es un cinch." We all laughed.

A few days later I was talking about the subject of courtship and such visits with a small group of boys in their late teens. I asked them about what happened when one or another of them decided he wanted to marry.

Emilio: "The boy tells his father. Then, the father can go ask for the girl if he wants to, or he can send someone else. In the majority of cases someone else is sent. Here in Frontera people have always chosen one of four men who are known as the portadores of the community."

Urbano: "They get paid, you know. One pays them what one can. They deserve payment, after all it's a risk."

There was general laughter over this last remark, as there almost always is, so I asked why it should be such risky business.

Urbano: "Well, if they are run out of the house, it is they [the portadores] who take the shame" (Si salen corridos, ellos son los que llevan la vergüenza).

Everyone in the group agreed with this evaluation of the situation.

Matrimonial intermediaries have been observed elsewhere in Latin-America. C. Guiteras Holmes, for example, has spoken of the embajadores, or the "embassadors," who function as such for the prospective bride in Sayula, Mexico (1952:176-177); and John Gillen has identified the practice in Moche, Peru (1947). In their comprehensive work on a Columbian mestizo village, Gerardo and Alicia Reichel-Dolmatoff have made reference to the use of personal intermediaries in a wide range of situations involving interpersonal relations (1961).

Although such Latin-American intermediary activity is frequently mentioned in literature, detailed and systematically analytic accounts of this behavior, such as that presented by M. N. Diaz, are relatively rare. Most probably this is primarily due to the fact that communications through third parties are normally conducted upon mutually agreed conditions of relative secrecy. Nevertheless, from existing information certain questions can be raised and certain conclusions can be indicated. First, one may ask, "What is the range of social situations in which intermediaries are used?" Second, "What is the nature of this particular social mechanism and of the individuals who make use of it?" And third, "What theoretical importance does this activity have in anthropological theory?"

In answer to the first question which concerns the range of social situations in which the intermediary is called into action, we have examples from Tepoztlan. Here, a young man may send his mother to collect wages that are due him (Lewis 1951:112)--for who can refuse a mother? Here, also, some young men may approach or communicate with a girl through in intermediary (Ibid:400), much as is done throughout Latin-America. Already mentioned, of course, is the existence of the patron-client relationship in Tzintzuntzan in which the client sends an intermediary to represent him on a number of occasions. In the Colombian village of Aritama, intermediaries are used for the following reasons: to request a man to be a compadre; to establish or re-establish credit, especially for individuals who are not well known in the village; to request participation from neighbors in traditional cooperative labor; to collect wages due; to request a loan from an employer; to collect a debt; to request the services of a healer; and to communicate with relatives

or a spouse following a quarrel and the cessation of speaking relations (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1961).

Among the Mexican-Americans in South Texas, an intermediary is used in the following situations: when an individual requests admission or readmission into the local Men's Mutual Aid Society; when requesting a girl in marriage; when requesting a loan; when asking a politician for a political favor; when a saint or a folk-saint is asked to intervene in one's behalf; and when communicating with a relative or spouse following a cessation of speaking relations.

From these examples of intermediary activity, two general patterns of interaction emerge. First, intermediaries appear to be used primarily in those situations in which one person is requesting something of another. Under such circumstances, then, the person making the request withholds himself from a face-to-face encounter and sends another person to present his case. This being so, the selection of a representative most often is oriented toward the selection of an individual who will present the case in its most favorable or impressive light, of which more later.

The second pattern which emerges from intermediary activity makes it apparent that the device fundamentally constitutes a means by which people can communicate with non-kin, as the overwhelming number of cases cited indicate. The exception, of course, is that situation in which relatives, or a married couple, have ceased to talk to one another. Most interesting here is the fact that an essentially non-kin communicating device is used to communicate with kin, as if to indicate that during such a breach of intrafamilial relations, the expected recognition of kinship has ceased to exist.

Turning now to the second question which involves the nature of this social mechanism and the people who make use of it, we may view intermediary activity now from a more individual and personal point of view. Why, in the first place, send another person to speak for you? Clearly the reasons for this are many. Tepoztecans, for example, consider it to be personally humiliating to have to ask for employment (Lewis 1951:112), and also when they have to ask for a loan (Ibid.:172). In Aritama the situation is much the same, for here too many individuals appear to be hyper-reluctant to admit to another person that they are in need of anything whatsoever. For example, the Reichel-Dolmatoffs write,

> That . . . hired labor presents many problems is to be expected. The first difficulty arises as soon as the employer begins to look for laborers. Very rarely, practically never, can a person be approached directly and asked to work for a certain time and wage. This would be embarrassing for both parties and most humiliating for the one who is offered the work. The latter is likely to refuse, to feel offended, or even to answer haughtily, "I myself am looking for hired help." Such arrangements, therefore, must be made through an intermediary--a relative, a friend, or a compadre who, with the necessary diplomacy and caution, suggests that the one accept the work and the conditions offered by the other (1961:262, my emphasis).

One reason for utilizing a go-between, therefore, is to maintain in some fashion the reality or the fiction that one of the parties involved is

not in such desperate straits that he will humiliate himself by asking personally for a favor. This type of behavior, therefore, may be called an effort at impression management (Goffman 1959) insofar as it involves the goal of conveying or controlling an impression of the self. It differs from Goffman's formulations, however, in that here a third party is utilized to achieve a similar end.

From the standpoint of the actual participants, perhaps even more important than the humiliation of finding it necessary to ask something from someone else, is the ever present possibility of refusal. Thus it has been said that Tepoztecan boys whose advances have been refused by a girl, ". . . have been known to get drunk for days because of the humiliation" (Lewis 1951:400); and again, ". . . there is always the possibility of the marriage request being refused" (ibid.:405). In a strikingly similar vein, the Reichel-Dolmatoffs forcefully write that in Aritama the refusal to be a padrino is considered to be a very great offense (1961:172). It is also an offense in Aritama to refuse a request to participate in cooperative labor (ibid.:257), or to personally attempt to collect payment for a loan (ibid.: 445). And, as young Urbano said in South Texas, if matrimonial intermediaries are run out of the house, it is they who take the shame. In Frontera, then, as it probably is elsewhere in Latin-America, this mechanism of displacing the shame through the use of a third party tends to preserve the integrity of the requesting party or parties. This is perhaps the principal reason for the nervous joking that often takes place during such activities in Frontera. It is also the reason why an intermediary worth his mettle carefully informs himself and assures himself that the negotiations will probably go well in the diplomatic endeavor. In any event, if a request is refused through a third party, the person making the request has not been directly refused. Therefore, he is not required to "save face" by replying in kind.

Nevertheless, the possibilities of refusal and humiliation call for a kind of intermediary maneuvering which involves complex rules of social diplomacy. Basic to such maneuvering in most, if not all, of the cases of intermediary activity is the fact that the delegate selected is expected or believed to be relatively neutral during negotiations. For example, Diaz writes that,

> The groom selects someone to present his case to the bride's family. The delegate may be a relative, but no particular kinsman is preferred, although ordinarily neither his father nor his brothers are expected to perform this service. Again a certain amount of "neutrality" is expected of the peacemaker (1964:180, my emphasis).

Relative neutrality for the intermediary is also achieved in Aritama. The Dolmatoffs write,

> A person should never try to collect a debt and never, in any way, remind the debtor of his obligations by asking him to fulfill them. One has to wait until he is paid. Sometimes one might send an "innocent" intermediary, such as a child or a complete stranger . . . (1961:445, my emphasis).

Ideally, then, the intermediary should not take personal sides in any transaction to the explicit exclusion of the other. Should he do so, he is thereby involved on a one-to-one basis and the rules of the diplomatic role have been changed. Thus he has jeopardized and subverted the very purpose

which he is supposed to serve. Most commonly, then, the principal task of the intermediary is to convey the impression desired by the person or persons who have sent him on his mission. It is because of this expected neutrality, plus the fact that the responsibility is to convey an image of another person, and because such activities can and often are manipulated toward desired ends, that I have chosen to characterize intermediaries as surrogates for the self. The degree to which such activities are manipulated constitutes impression management.

An excellent case in point is the account provided by Diaz when she describes the negotiations between the representative of a groom and the parents of the girl whom he has stolen. In this situation, the intermediary is asking the girl's parents to accept the fact as accomplished, and to give their blessing to the intended union. At this point, the groom's representative pictures him as a good but impetuous boy, one who has seen the error of his ways, a boy who is eager to make amends, and one whose family, after all, is honorable (ibid.:181).

During similar occasions in Frontera, the impressions conveyed by an intermediary may include the fact or fiction that a prospective son-in-law is quite ready to settle down, that he is a man like any other and is in need of a wife, that he is ready to take his place in the natural order of things, and that he has actually spoken very little to the girl whom he intends to marry. This last remark is intended to convey the notion that if two young people have hardly had time to talk to one another they have hardly had time for anything else. Thus, everyone's honor is preserved through this very real or very fictional verbal device.

There is still another dimension to the use of surrogates when one views them as a tool for managing impressions. This concerns the very widespread reluctance of Latin-Americans to justify or excuse their behavior to another person, particularly if that other person is not a relative. However, the surrogate for the self can be requested to convey any justifications which a given individual may deem essential for the successful completion of a transaction. While requesting a loan, for example, an individual may be very reluctant to admit dire need. But he may convey this notion to his intermediary who, in turn, expresses it to the person to whom he has been sent. The worthy intermediary accomplishes this in as neutral a manner as possible, almost in the form of casual and subsidiary observations. Never should he explicitly state that he has been told to say such a thing.

In addition, it is generally considered very bad form to boast, to exaggerate, or to picture oneself in a better light than one's neighbors. Once again, however, through the proper use of a surrogate this can be judiciously accomplished.

Probably the most complicated maneuver in such transactions involves what may be termed double impression management. By this I refer to those cases in which a person who selects a surrogate expects to make an impression upon the person selected, as well as upon the one to whom he is being sent. In politics, for example, this is very often the case. In effect, here the person seeking a favor is saying to his surrogate, "You are more important than I am. You can talk to those people. You know how to talk to them."

Finally, a surrogate can be utilized not only to convey desired information, but he can also be used as a mechanism for withholding information. For example, it is common for an individual to tactfully request his representative to withhold certain bits of information or to avoid certain subjects. Thus, a surrogate may be asked not to mention an "unfortunate" incident in the past, or not to mention that the person requesting a loan has recently received money from another source. Similarly, a surrogate may be asked not to mention that the person who has sent him to ask for a girl's hand had been refused unceremoniously in another village. In this manner, another degree of control has been exercised.

To summarize the management of impressions through surrogates, an individual may present a picture of himself in three principal ways. First, he may have himself presented in a ritualistic, stereotypic and culturally prescribed way. Second, he may use the surrogate as a device by which he can boast in an acceptable manner. Third, he may choose to withhold basic or pertinent information for a variety of reasons.

Now, one may ask, what significance does intermediary activity have from the standpoint of anthropological theory?

First, such activity can be viewed as a mechanism through which the ever-present possibility of open conflict as the result of a humiliating refusal is minimized, thus introducing an element of stability in a potentially unstable situation. Furthermore, the very same mechanism also can be used to re-establish severed relations, as often is the case with husbands, wives, and relatives. In short, intermediary activity may be a social device for conflict avoidance as well as conflict resolution.

Second, a dimension of the dyadic contractual relationship (Foster 1961) is found in the use of intermediaries. For example, if a man asks a compadre to serve as a go-between, and the request is accepted, the dyadic co-parent relationship is thereby further cemented; and, if the compadre-surrogate is successful in his mission, the situation is now one of a double favor granted. One favor has been to agree to serve as the intermediary, and the other has come from the person to whom he has been sent. But no matter who is selected to serve in the capacity of intermediary, in such situations there are always a minimum of three persons who are fundamentally involved. This being the case, it can be said that in a wide variety of social circumstances the basic connecting, or catalytic, link between different elements in Latin-American social structure is a transitory triad.

Third, and finally, surrogative activity may also constitute an integral part of the on-going process of role transition. In other words, when the surrogative task is done successfully, and the two principals once again meet face to face, often it will be in a new social context which involves roles that are different from those they occupied prior to the initiation of the negotiations. For now a young man is no longer a neighbor's son, or a suitor. He is now a son-in-law, a brother-in-law, a husband. Similarly, a man may no longer be just a neighbor. He is now a member of the Men's Mutual Aid Society, a comrade, a colleague. Similar transitions take place from neighbor to member of a cooperative work group. And due to such role transitions, new reciprocal relationships are now called for, with new role expecta-

tions and new demands. In short, when a surrogate goes out to perform his task, it is often a signal that a shift in the membership of some structural segments of the social order is in the offing. And when the intermediary returns with a favorable response, quite often a new structural re-alignment has been accomplished.

ENDNOTE

[1]Research for this paper was supported in part by National Institute of Mental Health Grant 5 T1 MH-8104, and it is a modified version of a paper delivered at the 1964 Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association at Detroit, Michigan. I am grateful to Noel Chrisman, Tom Lanagan, and Lucile Newman for their comments.

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