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A Stranger Determined to Remain One

William Gamson
Boston College

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Remembering Erving Goffman

William Gamson: A Stranger Determined to Remain One

This interview with William Gamson, Professor of Sociology at Boston College, was recorded over the phone on January 8, 2009. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, after which Dr. Gamson edited the transcript. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information and additional materials inserted during the editing process appear in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as “[?]”.

[Posted 04-28-09]

Shalin: Greetings. This is Dmitri Shalin from the University of Nevada. Is this Bill?

Gamson: Yes, this is Bill Gamson.

Shalin: How are you, Bill?

Gamson: Good.

Shalin: Let me ask you if it would be OK for me to record our conversation and then send you the transcript for further editing, redacting, and so on?

Gamson: That’s fine with me. I’ve read the other two interviews and would be happy to abide by the same procedure.

Shalin: Wonderful. You can see the bases I am trying to touch – how the two of you met, which impression Goffman left on you, any intersection you find between Erving’s ideas and his life, and so on. We can jump back and forth, move in any direction you choose. Would that be all right?

Gamson: Yes, that’s fine.

Shalin: Do you remember your first encounter with Erving?

Gamson: Yes. Unlike Sherri Cavan and Renee Fox, I had [only] periodic contact with him. The first one, I believe, was in 1963 or 1964 at a conference on strategic interaction [that took place] on Russian River in California.

Shalin: Russian River in California?!

Gamson: Yes. It was a very interesting conference. If I remember the title, it was “Strategic Interaction and Conflict.” There were a lot of different people there from – I am looking for some notes here. Anyway, that was a three day

conference. I was already aware of his [Goffman's] works. There were very interesting interactions. I'll just mention other contacts with him, and then come back.

Shalin: Sure.

Gamson: I had contact with him when I was on the ASA Council and he was president-elect. That was shortly before his death. In between, he was invited to the University of Michigan to give the Katz-Newcomb lecture. He visited for a couple of days, and I hosted that. I introduced him and sort of took care hosting him while he was in Ann Arbor. And those [occasions] are really the only personal contacts that I had with him. I wrote a paper on Goffman's legacy to political sociology.

Shalin: Yes, I have it right in front of me, it's very interesting. I'll come back to it later. Go ahead.

Gamson: OK. I'll give you some of my impressions of him at this conference in 1964, I think it was, the strategic interaction conference. I had already discovered his work, I guess *Presentation of Self*. I may have even read before that his 1955 paper "On Facework."

Shalin: Yes, later on he collected it in a book along with other articles. I believe it appeared in *Interaction Rituals*.

Gamson: So I was aware of his works. I was at Harvard from '59 to '62, and Harold Garfinkel was [housed] in the same little building that we had on Felton Street in Cambridge.

Shalin: You knew Garfinkel?

Gamson: Harold Garfinkel was sort of a fringe member of the department of social relations, beginning his work on ethnomethodology. . . . He had a student, I don't know if you ran across his name – Volney Steffle?

Shalin: I don't think so.

Gamson: He was one of the people in Garfinkel's group. I went to various seminars, and I was aware of the interaction disruption experiments, and even use them along with a lot of Goffman's stuff when I started teaching introductory social psychology courses. When I was teaching social psychology I had students do as an assignment Garfinkel's disruption experiment – go out and do various little experiments in town, in Ann Arbor, like going into a store and offering more than the list price for an object.

Shalin: That was a trust breaching experiment.

Gamson: Right. I was doing these kinds of things, using a lot of Goffman in the course. So I was very much aware of him, even though he was not famous at this point. At the conference I was struck by, I guess, his one-upmanship, his fearlessness on the one hand. He was taking people on . . . This was a conference that had people like Albert Wohlstetter and other Rand Corporation types. Actually, Daniel Ellsberg was there. Kathleen Archibald was one of the organizers. There were a number of other prominent people in the field of strategic interaction and conflict. I was myself sort of intimidated, but Goffman would take them on in a very aggressive one-upmanship way. Some of your discussions and interviews, with Sherri [Cavan] for instance, remind me of the way he basically challenged [others]. . . I was reading Stephen Potter on one-upmanship and gamesmanship and saw Goffman as providing a kind of intellectual basis for that. I witnessed that a lot. I also remember him playing on my own vulnerability, saying something like, "Well, you've been talking a lot." Cause I was pretty silent through all of this. Somehow he noticed that I felt insecure. I was kind of surprised because I didn't feel like I was any threat to him, didn't see why this was necessary. That was just his style of interacting with people.

Shalin: Very interesting. Go ahead.

Gamson: He took on the Rand Corporation people and was challenging them. There were other people there like Anatol Rapoport who was also doing the challenging, but Goffman would bring out things that were not normally said. If someone stuttered or did something like that, he might pick on that, [seize on] anything that seem to give him an edge. I didn't find that . . . That is not my own personal style, the competitiveness did not really appeal to me. But I thought he was challenging people who ought to have been challenged, but he was doing it not so much on the content of what they were saying as on style and [self] presentation sort of things. I felt ambivalent about it but [remained] an admirer of his work.

I continued to be influenced by his works, so when we had this Katz Newcomb lecture series at Michigan, he was a popular, obvious choice. He was his usual self on this visit. I introduced him and he said something nice about that, I remember. Something like, "I would be happy to go on listening to Bill Gamson introducing me the whole day." The things I emphasized in this introduction, as I remember, were his playfulness. I think there is lot's that I have learned from him. [What I said was] that we were going to have serious fun, that sociology could be fun and playful, and that does not make it any less serious.

Shalin: Interesting observation. Maybe we could explore it later, but please go ahead.

Gamson: OK, that went well. I remember him showing his usual idiosyncrasies. One of the things that struck me about him – and this is something that comes up in the interviews [about Goffman] – that a lot of his style had to do not only with him being a Jew growing up in a provincial Canadian town but from his being short.

Shalin: In the hindsight, how short do you think he was?

Gamson: Well, he was a little guy. He had this feisty little guy truculence. . . . I am, well I was before I shrank a little bit, 5'11, an average height. He was a short man – 5'5, 5'6. Definitely short, a little guy, and the guys he was taking on were often large people, you know. He was taking them verbally, not physically, but he was challenging them. I thought that he developed his style around being an outsider, a Jew growing up in provincial Canada, and being smaller than the other kids. That style did have a lot to do with machismo and so forth as he was expressing it.

The other thing that I noticed about him personally was when he was doing the ASA business. At the ASA conventions he would not wear a name tag, and certainly not a name tag with the ribbon saying he is president-elect. I thought that given his position and the fact a lot of people recognized him that was . . .

Shalin: . . . a statement.

Gamson: Yes, it was a statement that he wouldn't blend in some way. He didn't want to identify [himself]. To me wearing a name tag is to help the other person. I know from my own experience that I see all those people who look familiar but I don't quite remember their names. . . . It's a way not to embarrass myself and not embarrass them. That certainly was not a consideration for him.

Shalin: How do you interpret his behavior? Was it self-effacement, was it – what?

Gamson: I think it was a statement of his ambivalence about being in this position. Maybe he . . . he wanted it and he didn't want it. There were things in his presidential address [that showed] he continued to identify himself as an outsider.

Shalin: He was a stranger determined to remain one.

Gamson: Right, right.

Shalin: Go ahead. Go with the flow, whatever comes to your mind.

Gamson: I was remembering . . . The things added up for me, I said it in my article. Who was it – Bennett Berger?

Shalin: Yes, Bennett Berger. He said that Goffman identified with the “beautiful losers” of this world.”

Gamson: I thought that quote captured [him] very well. Let’s see if I can find that quote. . . . “The role distance which is obliged with the deviantly successful out of loyalty to all the beautiful losers who never made it.” It’s a brilliant line.

Shalin: It is a brilliant line, except that he could be so cruel to those beautiful losers. One guy was just denied tenure at Penn, and what does Goffman say – “Well, not everyone is good enough to be at this fine department.” How’s that for admiring beautiful losers?

Gamson: Yes.

Shalin: That’s what fascinates me. I see all this ambivalence in Goffman.

Gamson: Yes, that’s right. I’ve said that “In the eternal hunt Goffman ran with the hares.”

Shalin: How do you mean? People quote your line, and I am not sure I follow it.

Gamson: It’s a line that comes, I guess, from Thomas Hardy, “People who run with the hounds and those who run with the hares.”

Shalin: I am too illiterate, I guess.

Gamson: That’s what I allude to. . . . It means, you either run with the hounds . . .

Shalin: Oh, I see – you are either chasing or the chased.

Gamson: So he ran with the hares but in certain ways . . .

Shalin: He turned into a hound now and then.

Gamson: That’s right. The act of meanness to me [at the California conference] when I was insecure . . . but I was a pretty cocky kid in my late

20s or early 30s. All those people, Goffman was half a generation older, he was in the early 40s or something.

Shalin: He was born in 1922.

Gamson: Yes. And I was born in 1934. If I was 30, I was barely 30. And there were all those illustrious people in the field [where] I was a junior person. He saw that I was intimidated, and instead of being a comfort, he used it as a . . . it was so gratuitous. I could understand him doing it to Albert Wohlstetter, a big shot who was putting on airs and making claims. He had to be punctured. I approve of that, but I do not approve of his turning on me.

[Laughter]

Shalin: Any specific example where you felt Erving was kind of picking on you?

Gamson: I never felt that way with him after that. On other occasions when I was hosting him, he was gracious. I never felt like he was . . . [during] the interactions we had at the [ASA] Council I kind of felt allied with him. I never felt like he was putting me down. So it is odd that when I was in a more secure position, he didn't feel the need to do that. It was only when I was at my most vulnerable. And I don't fully understand that, really. What's attractive about his rebelliousness and putdowns is that it is directed at pompous and powerful people. When it is directed at graduate students who feel most vulnerable, young professionals like I was in the early days, it is so unnecessary and gratuitous that you wonder what he got out of it – being one up on someone who is already one down.

Shalin: Any interpretation, any hunch?

Gamson: Only that it has become so habitual, so much part of his interaction style, that he didn't have control over it, that he [acted] indiscriminately.

Shalin: Do you know Joe Gusfield?

Gamson: Yes, I do.

Shalin: I had a fascinating interview with him a few days back. He told me how they used to play the game of dozens at Chicago. It's a game where you single out someone in a group and start picking on that person. Ribbing, mocking, picking on the weakest was sort of the point here. See what I mean?

Gamson: Yes, yes.

Shalin: At that point you were vulnerable and Goffman saw your weakness, but when you were in power, the game was not so much fun. Also, you might have become a resource for Erving that he valued in some ways.

Gamson: Yes, who knows. But he didn't shy away from puncturing those who were in power.

Shalin: OK, he did not discriminate.

Gamson: It wasn't that he just picked on the weak. His major challenge was the people who were powerful. Those are the ones that he felt he had to be one up on. He was utterly fearless. I would hold it against him if he did it only to people who were weak and vulnerable, but he mostly did it to people who were powerful and smug, I think. It's just that he couldn't seem [to know where] to stop. It turned into an operating style that he probably hadn't much awareness of, or if he had an awareness of it, he didn't have any desire to change it. I didn't have any sense of his private life, don't remember him sharing anything. I didn't know about his first wife's suicide until I read those interviews. . . . It was like his personal life [was off limit]. Even if you asked me about his politics, I wouldn't [know]. I mean that was fine, that wouldn't have been appropriate [to ask]. I would never have asked something about his private life. There was some kind of barrier there. I'd feel like I was invading his privacy, although with other people [I could inquire] – "Do you have kids?" But it didn't feel right with Erving. That would have been invasive.

Shalin: He wasn't getting chummy with you so you would feel comfortable asking, "How is life?"

Gamson: Yes, that's right. I am much more political than he is, but I don't remember us having any problems or difficulties about [this subject]. One interview I read talks about him as being politically conservative.

Shalin: That is not your sense.

Gamson: I thought he was more apolitical. And this business about his politics being anarchist, it's more . . .

Shalin: . . . politics of a maverick. He was "mavericky" as Sarah Palin would say.

Gamson: That's right [**Laughing**]. He was definitely that.

[**Laughter**]

I didn't see him as being skeptical about the New Left, complaining about that. He may have felt sometimes it was a nuisance, but [it didn't seem like] he was carrying this around with him.

Shalin: Do you know Saul Mendlowitz?

Gamson: I sort of remember him. I think I met him a few times.

Shalin: He is a friend of Erving, one of the very few people Erving's son invited for a get-together after his father's death. Anyway, Saul tells me that in the early 50's, they thought of inviting Erving to a meeting of some left-wing university of Chicago grad students, but then they decided not to do this. Now, Erving knew well Mendlowitz's left political leaning and didn't seem to mind. I asked Saul specifically about McCarthyism, the anticommunist witch hunts, and Saul replied that Erving would have had none of that. That is, Goffman didn't feel uncomfortable with Saul's political leanings.

Gamson: That was my sense, too. He wasn't of it but . . . I cannot imagine that he didn't have some affection for this [political] strain. There was an imp in him, the "yippee" tendency, like running a pig for a president.

Shalin: Even though he didn't care much for hippies. Some accounts I have collected mention the California hippy movement as one of the reasons he left Berkeley. Apparently, it started having an impact on his son, and Erving did not appreciate that.

Gamson: Well [laughing]. He had some conventional streak too. He has this, and I quote some article, "the art of becoming the pain in the ass" and using "systematic impoliteness."

Shalin: I use this quote [it comes from Goffman's presidential address] as an epigraph to my ASA paper on Goffman's biography and the interaction order. The second quote I use comes from Dean MacCannell who wrote that Erving knew his Sartre well, using his notion of bad faith as a way to stay authentic in this phony world of ours.

Gamson: This is insightful, and consistent with the fact that he wouldn't want people to know his concern about Berkeley counterculture and the hippy influence on his son. It's too conventional, too mainstream for his image [Laughing].

Shalin: Yet, he was concerned.

Gamson: Yes. He had conventional concerns that parents have.

Shalin: And he should have had those concerns, they are normal for parents who wonder whether their son is into drugs or something.

Gamson: But it seems typical of him that he wouldn't want this to be known about himself.

Shalin: Could you develop this thought?

Gamson: He had some conventional bourgeois concerns in his backstage, but he wanted to present himself as this irreverent, challenging, provocative, mischievous person. And that conventionality was inconsistent with that [image], so he kept it hidden. It's funny [because most] people want to hide the deviant part of their backstage, and he was hiding this conventional part.

Shalin: That's right. He knew how to explore other people's back stages, but when it came to his own, he played the conventional game of being private.

Gamson: I think that's true, but to me that's not necessarily inconsistent [**Laughing**]. Exposing other people's backstage is part of one-upmanship. You know their tricks but you do not reveal your own because that makes you more vulnerable.

Shalin: This way you are in control.

Gamson: Right, and remain invisible in your backstage at the same time. The issue of control is very central. Both Renee Fox and Sherri Cavan talk about that, which I think is true.

Shalin: The conference on strategic interaction – it was before Erving published his book *Strategic Interaction*, which came out in early 70s, I think.

Gamson: Yes, it was well before this book.

Shalin: Did Erving already show concerns for issues fleshed out in his book – spy craft, shell games?

Gamson: No, it was more on conflict, conflict resolution. It was more on Cold War, the concern was international and not so much interpersonal. It would be interesting to know how Goffman was recruited into that. I guess you could see . . . Some of his essays, even in his piece on facework, have an element of strategic interaction.

Shalin: Sure, and also his "Cooling the Mark Out."

Gamson: Right. And I think there was an effort to cover both macro and micro, so Goffman would have been seen as talking about strategic interaction on a more micro level. There were others who were talking about the more macro level. I don't know how the process of selection went. It was pretty varied.

Shalin: By 1964, *Presentation of Self* was out, and so was *Asylums*, other works came out.

Gamson: I was very aware of him, and I think other people too. I actually got my degree in social psychology rather than in sociology at Michigan. When I went to Harvard, there was the department of social relations which also had this interest in the interdisciplinary bridging. I think Goffman's work was seen as bridging . . .

Shalin: . . . macro and micro. That makes good sense.

Gamson: Yes. He was already becoming visible to a smaller group, and to people who organized this conference he must have seemed like a good [fit], the kind of person they would want.

Shalin: Any other episodes besides the one you already mentioned, something that illustrates his willingness to take on the powerful?

Gamson: That's a toughie.

Shalin: I realize it was so long ago.

Gamson: Tom Schelling was also at this conference. Somehow I remember in particular Goffman taking on Albert Wohlstetter who was a Rand Corporation guy. He was a large man. The content of it – it was not on a substantive point. Maybe some vulnerability, misrepresentation, or exaggeration on which [Goffman] challenged Wohlstetter's honesty in some fashion. It wasn't like, "I disagree with that point."

Shalin: More like, "I don't find this to be a particularly honest way of looking at things."

Gamson: Right.

Shalin: More ad hominem.

Gamson: Yes, yes. I think Wohlstetter got flustered, in my recollection. He fumbled a little bit. It was a successful hit. I confess I took pleasure in it.

Shalin: [Laughing]. Shadenfreude.

Gamson: I had a negative image of Wohlstetter and the work that Rand Corporation was doing. It was early Vietnam, the worst period. I also had been involved in the nuclear freeze stuff. Wohlstetter was part of the nuclear priesthood, people who justified limited use of nuclear weapon.

Shalin: In those days they called it “negotiation from strength.”

Gamson: Yes. There was a debate going on, people were challenging the need for additional nuclear weapons or mega-weapons. There was already a worry about nuclear proliferation, and so forth. Wohlstetter represented the other side. He was a defender of nuclear strategy basically.

Shalin: Do you recall what kind of challenge Goffman presented to you at that conference?

Gamson: Well, I was intimidated at that conference. I wasn't really speaking up. There were about 20 people on the panel, sitting around the table, making presentations, responding. I had things to say in my mind, but I never broke into it. Kind of typical situation where people of lower status don't speak. Some other junior people there might have been in the same situation, but I am not normally that way. I felt intimidated in the way that I normally do not experience. I didn't think he particularly knew me. There was a lot of off-time between sessions to hang around, and for him this was probably an offhand remark, but it indicated that he had noticed my insecurity and he was remarking on it.

Shalin: You don't remember the specific remark.

Gamson: Something ironic like, “You've been awfully talkative – trying to dominate the discussion?”

Shalin: I see.

Gamson: It just made me feel that my insecurities had been noticed.

Shalin: You thought you were invisible but your insecurity was duly noted.

Gamson: That's exactly right. Nothing is invisible to Erving.

Shalin: Nothing is. That's what I hear from people going back . . . I interviewed Erving's sister and Erving's cousin who knew Erving from childhood years and who told me about his remarkable capacity to notice things and comment on the ways of the world.

Gamson: I didn't hold this against him. I realized that's the way he was. I continue to be an admirer of his work. I was very influenced by *Frame Analysis*. My work was built on that. I was an enthusiastic endorser and supporter of inviting him for that lecture.

Shalin: It did not seem to be malicious on his part. If anything, he might have tried to put you at ease.

Gamson: I don't know if he was trying to put me at ease. In some sense, I suppose, he was acknowledging that he noticed me.

Shalin: You were included, in a way.

Gamson: I thought it was a fascinating conference. There was a publication that came out of it. You might be able to find who the participants were.

Shalin: Do you remember the book title?

Gamson: It was probably *Strategic Interaction and Conflict*. It might have been the proceedings. The person who would have edited it was Kathleen Archibald.

Shalin: The other encounter you had with Erving was when he ran for office.

Gamson: Which was more a set of encounters, because he sat on a Council and he served as president-elect, I guess.

Shalin: We'll get to it in a moment. Just to finish with the Michigan encounters, were you instrumental in bringing him for that lecture?

Gamson: I think I was instrumental. I chaired a social psychology program at the time that was sponsoring this special lectureship. It was the kind of business where you meet with people.

Shalin: Dignitaries and luminaries of your field.

Gamson: Yes.

Shalin: You were teaching there at the department of sociology?

Gamson: Yes. I was in Michigan from 1962 to 1982.

Shalin: And when did you invite Goffman?

Gamson: That was probably in the late 70s – seventy seven, seventy eight.

Shalin: He was at the apex of his influence.

Gamson: Yes.

Shalin: Was it a committee decision?

Gamson: I think I probably was the one who invited him, because I was hosting him and making all the arrangements. It fell to me, as I was a chair of the committee.

Shalin: You must have written to him.

Gamson: Yes, by letter or phone.

Shalin: No clear recollections.

Gamson: No. I knew him a little bit. I mean I hardly knew him, but I was very familiar with his work.

Shalin: If you come across any kind of letters or communications with Erving, please let me know. We have a section on documents in the Goffman archives that collects memorabilia – papers written for Goffman’s classes, syllabi, and so on.

Gamson: I doubt I have any of this. I don’t think I saved anything.

Shalin: OK. And Erving accepted your invitation right away.

Gamson: I think so. I don’t remember there being any problem. He was free to talk about whatever he wanted to talk about. I remember taking him out to dinner at a restaurant in Ypsilanti [a town near Ann Arbor]. He was doing some kind of one-upmanship with the waitress, people in there. It’s like he couldn’t . . . resist a temptation. There was stuff on the menu he thought was bizarre, something like that. There was a slightly embarrassing scene in which Erving . . .

Shalin: . . . challenged someone.

Gamson: . . . challenged someone there. But for the most part I don’t remember him seriously misbehaving.

Shalin: [**Laughing**]. Was there an honorarium involved?

Gamson: Yes, there was a substantial honorarium.

Shalin: And there was no bargaining involved.

Gamson: Right.

Shalin: Some accounts suggest that he used to offer a price list, with a serious lecture carrying one price tag and the crappy one . . .

Gamson: In this case there was a pretty good honorarium.

Shalin: And the talk was well attended.

Gamson: Yes, it was very well attended. I remember it was in an amphitheater, and it was pretty much filled up. There were questions afterwards. And I don't remember him pulling any. . . he didn't put anybody down. . . . There were some provocative things [in his talk].

Shalin: Intellectually provocative.

Gamson: Right, intellectually provocative.

Shalin: I recall that Erving once gave a lecture about "lecture" where he commented on the invited talk format, on the amazing thing that anybody would come to listen, take the lecturer serious, and even pay some con artist an honorarium, adding, "For which I thank you."

Gamson: No, he didn't do anything like that.

Shalin: So he answered all the questions.

Gamson: Yes, there was a lively discussion, a lively lecture. All I can remember is that it went smoothly.

Shalin: I know the feeling, you never know who, if anyone, will show up and stay through.

Gamson: Yes, I wasn't embarrassed.

Shalin: Bill, it sounds like you know a thing or two about embarrassment. We share that trait.

[Laughter]

Shalin: And Erving knew something about embarrassment as well. What I have learned about his childhood makes me see why. . . . And then you were involved with his presidential bid?

Gamson: I don't remember if I was involved with the nomination. I was on the ASA council [which] must have approved the nominees. I cannot remember who Erving ran against.

Shalin: There was a little known person; when Erving heard who he was running against, he reportedly said, "Who is this guy? I never heard of him." That might have been done on purpose. Apparently there was a petition drive in support of Erving's candidacy.

Gamson: I don't remember there being any opposition at all. I think there was a little bit of a surprise, I recall, that he was going to accept the nomination. I certainly remember the question raised as to whether he would be willing to do that. But he seemed . . . I don't think he fully embraced the role.

Shalin: He could never embrace completely any role. Role distance was part of his shtick.

Gamson: Right. He had to choose a theme and choose a program committee and all those things. The person is elected a year-and-a-half before they serve. Like they would elect right now someone to serve in 2010. Well, maybe the president was already elected. There is the program committee for the 2010 meeting. It's done well in advance.

Shalin: I know it's going back but could you remember when it was happening – maybe 1981? Because Erving died in November of 1982.

Gamson: I think he died in the beginning of his presidential year.

Shalin: He was elected president for 1982, and the nomination process would have been in '80 or '81. You say there were some questions of whether Goffman would accept the position – was the question actually posed to Erving?

Gamson: People asked if he would take the role seriously, nothing deeper than that. He was asked whether he would accept the nomination. . . . The question may have come up when the nominating committee reviewed the candidate. Somebody must have said, "Well, it's up to him."

Shalin: Did anybody actually ask him if he was interested?

Gamson: I don't think so. There was a general presumption that whoever is nominated would accept.

Shalin: So there was no prior confirmation that, if nominated, the person would run for office.

Gamson: The nominating committee is elected separately. There is probably somebody from the council serving on it ex officio. They would suggest a list of names, and the list has to be ratified by the council, I think. There might be some questions raised, but normally the recommendation of the nominating committee is accepted.

Shalin: You wouldn't remember the candidates on that list?

Gamson: No, I don't. That's recoverable, I think.

Shalin: Let me mention to you this. The ASA office has learned about the Erving Goffman Archives, liked the idea, and asked my permission to deposit whatever I collected in some ASA archives. Apparently, for some time there was talk about starting an oral history project. I said that would be fine with me, but the ASA has an Erving Goffman file from 1982, and I asked if I can access it. I was told that some of the files might be confidential so it might be difficult to arrange. . . . I thought it's been some 27 years since Erving died, maybe it is time to release the file.

Gamson: I don't know if I have any influence any more.

Shalin: You might be in a perfect position to ask about it. I haven't heard from the ASA office yet.

Gamson: I can't really believe there is anything personal or confidential in this file.

Shalin: I doubt that too. Maybe there is something related to the petition drive. Perhaps the ASA policies can be updated on that front.

Gamson: I would be happy to do that, Dmitri. I am not sure what influence I have, but I could send them a note.

Shalin: That would be great. I understand they just opened the William Thomas file. I was told it had something to do with the charge leveled against William Thomas and the ASA response to it.

Gamson: I will make a case and see [what happens]. . . .

Shalin: I think they may be ready, just need a little nudging.

Gamson: Yes, probably. It seems to me that the purpose of those archives is to preserve historical [record].

Shalin: What role did you play in that nomination process?

Gamson: I was on the Council. I think I had two terms on the Council. This was probably during my first term. I had been doing various ASA things, particularly related to the teaching project. So I had to work fairly closely with the ASA executive officer who had been involved in the variety of ASA activities before the Council. I don't remember having any special role in [the process]. I supported him for presidency. I certainly voted for him I am sure. It was kind of fun to have him around. Maybe because of the kinds of issues he would raise. . . . His style was sort of "I am a neophyte, I am asking these naïve questions." That's the way he would come on. "I am learning the role here," so to speak. But his questions were often not naïve; they were going at the taken for granted assumptions. . . . It didn't necessarily have a one-upmanship [dimension] to it. He was taking those bureaucratic [things that are] taken for granted and raising the question why we do that. These were often questions that provoked some [reflections] about assumptions, such as keeping the files closed, just as we were talking about.

[**Laughing**]. Why do we do something like that?

Shalin: Right, right.

Gamson: The executive officer was forced to justify practices that do not necessary have a clear rationale. There was a fair amount of questions that Erving would raise. I don't remember him being involved in any particular controversy.

Shalin: Apparently, he was taking his role quite seriously. I have some accounts pointing out that Erving immersed himself in the minutiae of the planning.

Gamson: Yes, he wanted to know who appoints the program committee. There were a lot of decisions about sessions.

Shalin: I understand that he chose not to announce any annual meeting theme that is normally proposed by the incoming presidents.

Gamson: Is that so?

Shalin: Yes. He didn't want a leitmotif because that would mean imposing his own agenda.

Gamson: I didn't realize that. That's one of the few prerogative that the president has.

Shalin: That's in keeping with his role as a maverick.

Gamson: Yes, that is part of the role distance we talked about. But he did what was necessary to move things forward for that meeting. I don't know when he knew he was sick.

Shalin: I understand that he returned from France in the summer of 1982 and underwent a medical procedure – the suspicion was that he had an ulcer. They opened him up and discovered that he had an inoperable cancer, with just a few months to live. He died later in the year, in November.

Gamson: Summer of '82 was right before the meeting.

Shalin: I am a bit hazy on the sequence of events here. Given that he died in November, shouldn't the ASA meeting with him presiding over it be in 1983? Or maybe he had a year of presidency ahead of him beginning in August of 1982?

Gamson: That's right.

Shalin: His presidential address was published in 1983.

Gamson: If his presidential address was published in '83, that means it was prepared for 1982. . . . The address is published after the meeting.

Shalin: OK. ASA meetings take place in August, and he missed it.

Gamson: Yes, and I might have missed it. I was moving from Ann Arbor to Boston. I don't remember – didn't somebody else present it?

Shalin: That's exactly what happened. I read someplace that Lofland read the address in lieu of Goffman. That must have been in 1983. This is the matter of record, so we can figure that out.

Gamson: Yes. Well, I have in front of me the reference to his [presidential] speech "The Interaction Order." It is dated February 1983. Probably Lofland read it at the 1982 meeting.

Shalin: And that wouldn't be in November.

Gamson: No, it wouldn't be that late – September or August. . . .

Shalin: Which means Goffman was still alive when Lofland read his presidential address in the 1982 ASA meeting.

Gamson: Yes, he was too sick to attend.

Shalin: That would make sense.

Gamson: He must have already written it.

Shalin: How did the ASA Council respond to Erving's candidacy?

Gamson: I would have to remember, but I don't think there was any [problem], perhaps a little amusement or skepticism – "Will he accept it, embrace the role?" There might have been a little uncertainty about that. It's like, "Yes, let's ask him." There were certainly his defenders. None would really question his stature. . . .

Shalin: Then, there was the vote, I imagine. Do you remember the tally, how the vote for the ASA president had gone in that year?

Gamson: In the election itself?

Shalin: Yes.

Gamson: I'd think he won easily but I don't remember.

Shalin: Perhaps this is in the Goffman file.

Gamson: That's the matter of public record.

Shalin: You mean the actual breakdown of votes is known, can be accessed?

Gamson: I am not sure. That's a good question. I think they may have just announced the winner to protect the loser.

Shalin: It would be interesting to get an idea how the membership voted.

Gamson: Yes. I am trying to remember for my term whether I knew the vote. I had an awkward situation of running against my close friend and colleague Charles Tilly.

Shalin: Which year was that?

Gamson: My term was in 1984.

Shalin: You won and Tilly lost.

Gamson: Yes, I voted for Tilly.

[Laughter]

Tilly and I talked it over. It was kind of crazy. He said, "Well, it's a win-win situation."

Shalin: Right. Was he elected later?

Gamson: I don't think that he was. He had every other honor but . . .

Shalin: That might have been his only run.

Gamson: Yes, as far as I know.

Shalin: You don't usually run the second time, as you do in politics. You have only one chance.

Gamson: The nominating committee might have decided to nominate him [again].

Shalin: So Tilly was cast in the role of a beautiful loser.

Gamson: Yes. I mean I would have . . . It was a sort of win-win situation. I voted for him. I felt like he would have been a great ASA president.

Shalin: Did he take his defeat gracefully? It didn't affect your relationship.

Gamson: Not in any way.

Shalin: He understood it was a game, there was no point taking it too seriously.

Gamson: Yes, we remained close. There was a nice memorial service for him.

Shalin: Yes. He died recently.

Bill, I tend to get too excited during my conversations, and I have to bear in mind that people get tired. So any time you feel enough is enough, you can stop. It's just that other names keep coming up, people like Blumer, Edward Shils, Gregory Stone, and I realize that I should not miss the opportunity to query those I speak to about these characters. Maybe someday I could have your take on Charles Tilly as well.

Gamson: I would be happy to send you the thing that I wrote for the memorial service.

Shalin: That's helpful, although the occasion is primarily hagiographic. I don't meant to press, though. Any other memories about Erving during this latter stage?

Gamson: No, I think I pretty well covered it.

Shalin: So these were your contacts with Erving.

Gamson: Yes, those three [I mentioned], the ASA being a more continued contact, for there were several different meetings. . . .

Shalin: You mentioned Erving's Jewishness – do you mind elaborating a bit more on that? How important Erving's Jewish roots were for him and his scholarship?

Gamson: It reinforced his outsider's image. He must have felt like the "other" growing up in a small provincial town. It was more the outsidersness of being Jewish rather than anything else.

Shalin: Sort of coming from the pale and making it in a major league.

Gamson: Yes. And a certain truculence of his – "I'm as good as anybody else. I will assert myself. I'm not gonna take a negative self-image from other people."

Shalin: You have seen Sherri Cavan's interview, right?

Gamson: Yes.

Shalin: She recalls – by the way she pronounces her name "Sherri" with the stress on the last syllable – Erving telling her he was running for ASA presidency to validate himself. She was kind of surprised to hear that. Any comments?

Gamson: I am a little surprised. I suppose we all need a validation. He never showed this side of himself to me – his needing validation. It didn't seem like it was burdensome for him to do that.

Shalin: More like a new challenge.

Gamson: Yes, exploring a different world. You know there is the staff support. You have at your disposal the ASA office to do various things. It's

not that onerous, really. I don't know – it is this conventional need we all have for validation. It was a bit of backstage that he was showing to – I didn't know she pronounces her name "Sherri" – he was willing to show it to her, something of a backstage. He always seemed so self-confident.

Shalin: Was there any change in his self-presentation over time?

Gamson: I had only snapshots of him during these periods. There is a kind of continuity in my [perception of him].

Shalin: Maybe he mellowed over the course of years.

Gamson: Perhaps a little bit. I don't remember him doing his one-upmanship as much. I mean don't have enough of a base to [generalize].

Shalin: That's right. You didn't have enough of a sample. I work with the notion of self-sampling which is involved in biographical and autobiographical constructions. We choose episodes from a vast universe of events and arrange them according to a certain narrative arch, but there is always the possibility that our self-sampling is biased. It can be self-enhancement bias or self-depreciation bias, but some self-sampling errors are almost inevitable. Stage management involved in self-presentation highlights parts of the self and edits out other. As you said, your baseline is too narrow to generalize.

Gamson: Yes, really.

Shalin: Still you allow that he might have grown less aggressive.

Gamson: I don't remember him pulling one-upmanship [tricks] at the Council meetings. He was there as a president-elect.

Shalin: At that point he may not have needed to prove that he could take the toughest guy in the room.

Gamson: Right.

Shalin: According to Tom Scheff, there was something of Goffman in his writings on risk taking, in Erving's essay "Where the Action Is." Tom wrote a book in 2006 titled *Goffman Unbound*, which I found interesting. He recounts his encounters with his mentor there. He believes that Goffman had what he class "hypermsculinity" syndrome he just had to take on the toughest guy. This reminds me of Vladimir Putin, believe it or not insofar as he angles to take control and disabuse anyone present of the idea that they are dealing with a weakling.

Gamson: Yes, I think that's accurate. That was my impression of him. Not so much when he was serving on the Council [where] people were deferring to him as president-elect on various issues. There was no biggest guy in the room to challenge.

Shalin: I gave a talk recently at the George Kennan Institute on "Patterns of Facework in Russian Culture: The Case of Vladimir Putin," using Goffman's *Strategic Interaction and Presentation of Self* as a theoretical framework to show how Putin manages his front stage. The idea was to demonstrate that Russian culture has a longstanding tradition of erecting Potemkin Portable Villages and tightly control access to its backstage regions.

Gamson: That's very interesting.

Shalin: I didn't put together this talk, but if you are interested, I will send it to you once I write it up.

Gamson: I am.

Shalin: I have your email address, so I can send you a few web links to my stuff that explores this subject.

Gamson: I probably should get off. . . .

Shalin: This was very insightful, Bill. I am grateful for our talk. Thank you very much.

Gamson: You are very welcome.

Shalin: And if you have a chance, please check with the ASA office if they can share that file.

Gamson: I made a note. I'll do that.

Shalin: Bye bye.

Gamson: Bye bye.

[End of the Recording]