

11-10-2009

When Dad Told Him about the Award, Goffman Replied, "Make Sure the Presentation Is in a Small Room So It Will Look Like a Lot of People Are There"

Carl B. Backman
Auburn University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives



Part of the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Backman, C. B. (2009). When Dad Told Him about the Award, Goffman Replied, "Make Sure the Presentation Is in a Small Room So It Will Look Like a Lot of People Are There". In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-2.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/3

This Correspondence is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Correspondence in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Correspondence has been accepted for inclusion in Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Remembering Erving Goffman

Carl B. Backman:

**When Dad Told Him about the Award, Goffman Replied,
"Make Sure the Presentation Is in a Small Room So It Will Look Like a Lot of People
Are There"**

Dr. Carl Backman, professor of sociology at Auburn University, wrote these memoir and gave his permission to post it in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 11-10-09]

November 4, 2009

Dr. Shalin,

I just read a biographical note of yours about Erving Goffman. My father, Carl W. Backman, was presumably on the committee that awarded Goffman the Cooley-Mead award because Dad and I set out at some ASA meeting to find Goffman and tell him he had won. I was probably a graduate student in sociology at the time. As we walked, Dad talked about Goffman's work on behavior in public, things like chit chat at parties and so on. I told him, "Dad, 15 years ago [when I was in junior high school] I told you how interesting I found such conversation and you said that was trivial interaction and not very important or interesting." He stopped, thought for a minute, and said, "It wasn't . . . then. Goffman showed us why it is [interesting]." We found Goffman (how, I don't know). To me Goffman looked like a man who was afraid of his own shadow. When Dad told him about the award, Goffman replied, "Make sure the presentation is in a small room so it will look like a lot of people are there." (Maybe Goffman knew about the award and Dad was just trying to pin down details, like would he even show up. At this remove I can't say and Dad died a couple of years ago, so I can't check with him.) At the time, I thought, hundreds of sociologists would probably show up anywhere they knew he would be, so a small room seemed like a lousy idea. I didn't go to the next year's meetings, so I don't know how it worked out.

I notice on your web site some interest in Soviet era intellectuals. Alex Simerenko was a sociologist whose father was an apple specialist in Russia who was disappeared by Stalin. I believe Alex got his PhD in sociology at Minnesota, taught at the University of Nevada Reno (when UNLV was known as Nevada Southern), then moved on to Penn State until his untimely death. I have a reprint of his on Soviet sociology (at least that's what I think it is on) along with a sweet personal note. He was sweet except when playing ping-

pong, when he became a terror. Is such material relevant to what you and your group are up to?

Carl Backman