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Joel Best

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

**Joel Best:**

**Goffman Told Me, "It Is Really Hard to Do That Kind of Thing Well," and That Was About all the Advice I Ever Got from Him**

This interview with Joel Best was recorded on August 13, 2007, during the ASA Annual meeting in New York. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the audio recording and Joel Best edited the text and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information appears in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as "[?]". The interviewer's questions are shortened a bit in several places.

[Posted 07-23-08]

**Shalin:** It is August 13. I am talking to Joel Best. Beforehand, I explained to Joel my interest in the intersection of biography and theory, and specifically in Erving Goffman whose life and work seem to overlap in an intriguing manner. To give you an example, Tom Scheff describes an episode when Goffman mocked him on the plane when Tom got sick and Erving, dispensing with the interaction order niceties like protecting the other person's face, mocked his student. Imagine how Tom must have felt when his teacher had loudly expounded on the awkwardness of the situation, the nature of his embarrassment, the mortification of the self. . . .

**Best:** [Laughing]

**Shalin:** Sounds harrowing, all right, but Goffman is also remembered kindly by many people. . . . I am looking at such contradictory enforcements, trying to figure out how one person can make such different impressions on various audiences. Would you care to share your impressions about Goffman the teacher, Goffman the man? But first what is the extent of your knowledge of Erving?

**Best:** I knew him very little. I came to Berkeley because he was there. He was very much my hero at the time. I chose Berkeley for my graduate studies solely because of Goffman. I had read his first five books.

**Shalin:** When was it?

**Best:** I came to Berkeley in the Fall of 1967. He had a seminar that ran all three quarters that academic year. When I went to his class for the first time, there was a bunch of people there, maybe 15 students.

**Shalin:** All graduate students?

**Best:** Yes. So, we are waiting for somebody to come around. Here comes the guy who looks a lot like Jack Lemmon. You don't see that in his pictures. He had a motorcycle helmet [in his hands], and he slapped the helmet down and started to talk. None of us knew at the time how Goffman looked – his books had no author's picture on them.

**Shalin:** How would you describe his appearance? I hear contradictory things about it. Some say he was 5'5". . . .

**Best:** Yes, something like that. He was not tall. He really looked like Jack Lemmon. He had curly hair, he was not heavy. So this guy came in and started talking. No one was sure who it was. Somebody said, "Excuse me, are you Professor Goffman?" And he said, "Yes." I don't know if he was being manipulative or not.

At that time he was working on what would become a front end of *Relations in Public*. *Interaction Ritual* was just coming out. He moved the class into a room at Barrows Hall. Sociology was up on, like, the fourth floor. Down on the second floor, I think, was the Business School. For that time it was a very high-tech room, which basically meant that it had an opaque projector. It was a media center with a bit of equipment. For a couple of weeks he lectured on "openings and closings," on little ritual exchanges. Some of it, I recognized later, would become the first part of *Relations in Public*. But very quickly the class disintegrated into something very different. He would bring thick folders, maybe 4-5 inches thick, filled with clippings. These might be photographs from the front page of a newspaper or from a society page. I remember there was a *New Yorker* cover – paintings, cartoons. We would look at pictures. That must have been a precursor of *Gender Advertisements*, although he was not focusing on gender, on sex roles at that point. . . . He would sit there, showing us many photos, maybe 20 photos of people standing or sitting face-to-face, looking right at each other. Then, maybe he would show us photos of people at a 120 degree angle. And we would think, you know, "What does this all mean?" I remember sitting there and thinking to myself: "I have no idea what it means."

**Shalin:** What was the course title?

**Best:** I don't know, probably "Social Interaction." I should have the syllabus some place. He gave us. . . . Now, what I really got out of the course, which was very good, was this. He gave us a massive bibliography. It was single-spaced. Oh, I don't know, maybe a dozen pages or something like that. And

he would say, "Go read that stuff. There will be a test the end of the quarter." We did not talk about any of that, though. I was thinking, "Geez, I am supposed to read that stuff." I was new to graduate school, it was my first quarter, and I wanted to make a big impression on Goffman. So, I went off and I read all that stuff. I went to biology library which had articles on the head distance between chickens. . . . This is what organizes a pecking order: chickens peck when their heads get within a certain distance of one another. . . . I went to the math library, and the psych library, and so on. Read all that stuff. We are going to have an essay exam, and this is just a massive amount of material. I thought, "How I am going to study for this. Then I thought, "Why don't I write questions for the exam, because there would be two questions." . . . Knowing the range of the material, I wrote six different questions, covering everything. Then I outlined answers to all of them. At the exam, I realized I had really hit his wavelength: both questions on the exam were questions I had written and outlined. I got an "A" in the course, and that was fabulous.

We continued on in the second quarter. And the second quarter was more of the same. I do not remember him being mean to anybody. At one point a student seemed surprised and asked whether the sequences in the [popular TV show] "Candid Camera" were staged. Goffman said, "Yes, Virginia. . . ." There wasn't a lot of personality to him. He wasn't hard on people.

So we had to write a paper. I remember writing a paper that was my attempt to do something Goffmanesque. Don't remember what it was about. It aped Goffman in a sense that it had examples from fiction, newspaper articles, and so on. I went to his office [to check on my grade], and he gave me a B+ on the paper. He told me, "It is really hard to do that kind of thing well." And that was about all the advice I ever got from him.

**Shalin:** You must have been disappointed.

**Best:** Well, I was a kid. I just turned 21, out of the Midwest. Other students were much older, bi-coastal. In comparison, I had a limited background. I did not sign up for the third quarter of the seminar because I thought I wasn't learning anything in the classes. . . . What I got from it, which was really great, was a tremendous introduction to the literature. And I got to study with a great man. It was an interesting experience, but not life-changing at all.

You might want to talk to a guy who has a terrible Goffman story. The guy's name is Alan Charles Kors, a historian at the University of Pennsylvania. He is a big advocate for academic freedom, a professor studying the Enlightenment. He told me a story about having gone to a dinner party where

Goffman just eviscerated the hostess, saying something like, "Here are all those important people you gathered here – is this the best that you can do?" I don't remember all the details.

**Shalin:** Meaning, Goffman was intentionally embarrassing, bent on showing the hostess he saw through her attempts to show off. . . .

**Best:** Yes, yes. But I have to say, he was never mean to me. Maybe because I was beneath contempt. I was just a kid. I was not pretentious at all because I did not feel I had anything to be pretentious about. He may not have seen me as a worthy target.

But that is my Goffman story. Goffman turned out to be very important to me. When I was an undergraduate, Goffman's work caused me to go to Berkeley. This proved to be a shrewd move, although at the time I went there simply because he was there and got quickly disillusioned with him. I went very much a fan.

**Shalin:** You are saying that chances to communicate were not many, he wasn't approachable. . . .

**Best:** We were not going for a beer after class. No, I was too young. That was not something I thought you did with professors. And he left the following year. He left for Penn.

**Shalin:** You don't know why he left?

**Best:** No, I don't know. . . . The other thing – his first five books, in my view, were really quite good, up through *Behavior in Public Places*, which is in some ways my favorite book. *Interaction Rituals* was mostly thrown together from the previously published stuff.

**Shalin:** Most of his books, I believe, contain materials previously published elsewhere.

**Best:** When it first came out, say, *Presentation of Self*, was published in an obscure edition.

**Shalin:** That's true.

**Best:** I thought *Relations in Public* was really disappointing. *Strategic Interaction*. . . . My view of Goffman is that Goffman had a kind of game that he would play. He would say, "Let's look at interaction as a kind of

performance.” In the next book it will be, “Let’s look at it as if it were all about involvement,” or “Let’s look at it as if it were about strategy,” or whatever. That was kind of interesting. It is not exactly cumulative. . . . His was a very clever, insightful mind, very impressive in that way. But I did not like *Frame Analysis* at all, or *Forms of Talk*. Once we start going into conversation analysis, I just punted. It did not seem to me that this was very interesting.

**Shalin:** *Gender Advertisements* was interesting, I thought.

**Best:** *Gender Advertisements* was different. But an awful lot of it. . . . Part of the problem is that to make his case, he had to make the same case again and again and again. It gets kind of old.

**Shalin:** I understand you have a session to catch. So, whenever you have to run. . . . What caught my eye was the case of his first wife committing suicide. It seems like she benefitted from the deinstitutionalization movement he started, yet as soon as she was out, she jumped off a bridge.

**Best:** Right.

**Shalin:** I noticed that his treatment of mental illness changed over the course of time. When you look at *Asylums*, it is mostly circumstances that account for mental illness. In the *Insanity of Place*, which seems like the most personal account of his own situation, mental illness is extricated from the quotation marks. Now Goffman says that mental illness could have an “organic” dimension. Still, he struggles to acknowledge that there is something not merely socially constructed. Yet he could not quite reconcile the two accounts. This is an example of how biography and theory can overlap. His perspective shows itself to be somewhat disembodied, in my view. He says the body is just a peg on which society hangs for a while social manufacture.

**Best:** You know, you really want to talk to guys who were there right before I came, people who wrote their dissertations with Goffman in the early 60s – John Lofland, John Irwin.

**Shalin:** I wrote to John Lofland. John Irwin sent to me a part of his unpublished autobiography where he talks about Goffman. Lofland wrote to me something like, “What makes you think that ground has not already been covered?”

**Best:** Of course he has written about Goffman. . . .

**Shalin:** I am trying to get in touch with Jackie Wiseman. Somebody told me she might be helpful.

**Best:** Goffman and Becker were apparently pals. Becker would show up at Berkeley at times.

**Shalin:** All right, I know you've got to run. Thanks a lot. I very much appreciate your. . . .

**[End of the recording]**