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Walter Clark
Alcohol Research Group

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Walter Clark:

Erving and Ira Were Counting Cards When a Couple of Biggest Men They Ever Saw Walked up Behind Them and Said, “We Don’t Want Your Play, Partner”

This conversation with Walter Clark, former researcher at the Alcohol Research Group, was recorded over the phone on July 17, 2009. 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 08-07-09]

Shalin: Greetings, Walter. This is Dmitri Shalin. Is this a good time for us to talk?

Clark: This is fine, if it suits you.

Shalin: That’s fine. I want to tell you about the procedure I follow and make sure it is OK with you. I would like to record our conversation, transcribe it, and send it to you for editing and revisions. At this point you can do whatever you want – redact parts of the conversation, add new material, and so on. Would that be OK with you?

Clark: Sure, that’s fine.

Shalin: Each conversation I have has its own trajectory, but it usually starts with a few words about the contributor, your pathway to sociology, how you encountered Erving’s work, what brought you to Berkeley, and then on to how you met Goffman. From that point on, we can move in any direction you wish. That, sort of, is an idea.

Clark: That’s fine.

Shalin: So, can you say a few words about yourself, how you came to be a sociologist?

Clark: I was a student of sociology in the California State College system in Los Angeles, and completed a Master’s degree there. I found this to be a very pleasant way of spending my time, so I thought I would pursue an academic career. I applied for and was accepted at Berkeley. I was familiar with people at Berkeley, through their writings, of course, not having met any of them. In 1959 I left the LA area, moved to Berkeley and began the study of sociology in

the department that was filled with people who were stars in those days, a very impressive array of people.

Well, I had to have a job, since I had to eat and pay rent, and for a while I worked in Sears and Roebuck, taking applications from people who wanted credit for refrigerators, or what have you. Then an opening came for a brand new study funded by the state government, called "Drinking Practices Study." That was 1960, I believe. The head of this organization was Ira Cisin. That organization still exists today as the Alcohol Research Group, although god knows how many transmogrifications [it went through]. After a while a woman came to work there, and that was Sky Goffman. She and I worked together and became friends. Ira Cisin also was a friend of Goffman. I came to know him [Goffman] in and out of class quite well, and his son Tommy.

That kind of brought me to the end of my studies at Berkeley. Not having completed my degree – and I never have, by the way – I was offered a job as an assistant professor at a Canadian university. I went there with the intent to finish my dissertation directed by Erving Goffman. After spending a few years at the university, I decided I really did not want to be an academic, and I wasn't real sure I wanted to be a sociologist, so I bailed out. I had some statistical background, and I returned to study alcohol addiction, or what have you, and that's how I spent the rest of my days.

Shalin: I see. Did you hear about Goffman before you met him? Was he on your radar screen as a scholar?

Clark: Oh, yes! Oh, yes, everybody knew this fellow's name. There was another guy I want to mention who was the reason why I wanted to go there. After all, who hadn't heard about Reinhard Bendix and Max Weber? Who had not heard of Neil Smelser for that matter, a carbon copy of Talcott Parsons, though much more intelligible one than Parsons ever was. A whole host of [other names] – Martin Lipset, Hannan Selvin – I knew all of these guys through their works but not in person. It was a heady time for me.

Shalin: And Erving's writing had already made an impression on you.

Clark: Oh, lord, yes! Erving had this ability, as you know, to see what people were doing when they didn't know it themselves. He could give you a five minute lecture on what people do in elevators. As he said in the beginning of his book *Presentation of Self*, he need produce no proof of what he says, for the reader will recognize the truth from his own experience. That's what Goffman could do. He would say, "Look and see." As Rembrandt might have

said, "Here is a paintbrush, now paint what you see." Many of us wondered how he could do it, and many of us tried to do it, but I don't think anyone ever matched him.

Shalin: Yes, it's the situation where everybody knows but nobody notices something. Erving has this ability to show what everybody knows without quite comprehending and appreciating what they see. This is a kind of tacit knowledge.

Clark: All true.

Shalin: Now, did you meet Sky before you met Erving?

Clark: I met Erving probably as a student in one of his classes, but I didn't know him outside of class. And Sky – by the way, her name is Angela Schuyler Goffman. . .

Shalin: That's right. Her maiden name is Choate.

Clark: I beg your pardon?

Shalin: Her maiden name is Choate. Her father owned a newspaper in Boston. So she was born Angelica Schuyler Choate.

Clark: All correct. I remember it now. She came from a moneyed background, very upper class. And Erving came out of a working class, out in the prairies of Canada, Manitoba, if I recall it correctly.

Shalin: Right. He lived in Dauphin for a while, then his family moved to Winnipeg.

Clark: Winnipeg, thank you.

Shalin: Do you remember the impression Erving left on you when you first encountered him – emotionally, intellectually, physically? For instance, how tall you think Erving was?

Clark: Oh, he was quite short, but Erving had been a wrestler in his youth, I think in high school and college. So while he was short in stature – I guess 5'7 or maybe 5'8 – he was a very husky fellow, and very graceful in his motions, sort of like a live animal in the way he moved. He was a very friendly and outgoing sort of person. Let me give you an example, which I will probably redact.

Shalin: Please do. Anything you want to keep confidential will stay this way, unless and until you tell me otherwise. You can edit any portion of our conversation once you get the transcript.

Clark: I hear you. And I will edit it once it comes. There was a student in one of our seminars who didn't know him well and who referred to Goffman to his face as "a little Jewish bastard." Not only Erving didn't resent it, he kind of giggled and went right on doing what he was doing. That was not through the lack of ability on Goffman's part – he could remove the paint from the walls if he chose to. I think he was genuinely amused.

Shalin: What kind of student would dare to say such a thing?

Clark: I don't remember the fellow's name, which is probably a blessing. But it was a jocular kind of thing . . . it was not meant to be an insult. I am not sure how to characterize it, but it certainly was not meant to be taken seriously.

Shalin: And Berkeley students would be comfortable jesting with their professors?

Clark: No, nobody in the room felt comfortable with that remark. We would refer to him in class as "Dr. Goffman," or whatever formal address one would use. Outside of class I might call him Erving, certainly I did after I became friendly with him and his family. I remember Erving putting his hand on my arm or back and saying, "Call me Erving," even though I might have wanted to call him "god."

Can I interrupt you for just a second?

Shalin: Please do.

Clark: Whatever happened to Tommy? I understand he is not living, but I don't know.

Shalin: Tom Goffman?

Clark: Pardon?

Shalin: Tom Goffman, Erving's son?

Clark: Yes.

Shalin: He is alive. I have been communicating with him. He is an oncologist, he is a doctor.

Clark: I am glad to hear that. I don't know where I got the idea that he was dead.

Shalin: No, no, no. Tom Goffman is alive, he has a son of his own. Tom knows about the Goffman archives and approved for posting there two of his articles, one on medical industrial complex, the other on a kind of face work doctors engage during consultation.

Clark: Tom was just a boy when I knew him. I am glad to hear he is alive [laughing]. I am glad to hear that he has some of the perceptiveness of his father.

Shalin: Did Tom leave on you any impression when you knew him?

Clark: I don't have any. He was just a boy.

Shalin: I see. You said that you took some classes with Erving.

Clark: Oh, whole bunch.

Shalin: Do you remember which?

Clark: One was "Deviance and Social Control." Others were seminars that had to do with whatever we were working on. Half the time he would lecture on his own, often reflecting whatever you had to say. He was wonderful.

Shalin: There were a lot of interchanges in his classes.

Clark: Oh, yes – lots.

Shalin: Those were graduate level classes.

Clark: All graduate level classes.

Shalin: What kind of teacher was he, how did he present himself in a classroom? What kind of grader was he?

Clark: Very informal style. More often than not he would be sitting on the desk. He did not dress in a formal fashion – a white shirt and tie that was common in those days. He would show up wearing a loose sport shirt of some kind and maybe blue jeans. When he saw you wandering around the plaza, he would address you in the first name. People felt very comfortable with him. They would say "Hi" to him or some joking remark, and he would carry on. Not that anybody believed that they were of equal in status, but he was not enforcing any discipline as to the status.

Shalin: Very interesting. Erving could be informal and approachable.

Clark: Absolutely.

Shalin: And that was with graduate students.

Clark: So far as I know, they were all graduate students.

Shalin: Did Erving have a particular reputation as a grader?

Clark: I don't know. Of course, the people in his seminars were students whom he somehow favored. He gave good grades. I never heard of anything to the contrary.

Shalin: So he gave you good grades.

Clark: Oh, yes.

Shalin: By the way, do you have any papers you wrote for Erving, any class notes or syllabi?

Clark: I have nothing, Sir. When I left academia, I took off all that stuff like a dirty shirt. I don't have one word that I wrote.

Shalin: [**Laughing**]. Once we are on this topic, what happened to your dissertation? I understand that you were working with Goffman on a thesis.

Clark: I was doing a kind of Goffman study of the police force in Berkeley, California. I did it for two years, and was in the process of writing the stuff up under his direction when I was kind of disillusioned with academia, and to some extent, with sociology. Eventually, I just stopped.

Shalin: So it had nothing to do with your advisor.

Clark: No, Erving remained a personal friend.

Shalin: How did you choose this topic? Did Erving suggest it?

Clark: I suggested it, and the reason I was able to do so was that a boyhood friend of mine had dropped out of the university and joined the police force, and I spent a lot of time riding around in a police car with him. Those days were far less formal than they are today. So I had a good knowledge of a lot of policemen, and it seemed like an interesting thing to do.

Shalin: What sort of problems you set out to investigate?

Clark: Face-to-face interactions of the police with whomever they deal with.

Shalin: You suggested the topic to Erving and he was pleased.

Clark: That is correct, yes. . . .

Shalin: Was he officially your mentor?

Clark: He was my mentor, but I had a foot in both camps. I worked with Ira Cisin who was a statistician, and the work I was doing for him was analysis of survey data. And that's what I ended up doing for the rest of my life, actually. Then I had one foot in Goffman's camp.

Shalin: You were working closely with Erving while you pursued this topic.

Clark: Oh, yes.

Shalin: Would you bring him thesis chapters? How did you interact at the time?

Clark: He would often be in an informal setting, perhaps a coffee shop on campus, perhaps his office, or whatever. And I would tell him about particular incident or show him something I wrote, and he would comment on that and ask very pointed questions.

Shalin: Do you remember any particular suggestions he made, the direction in which he wanted you to go with your dissertation?

Clark: He would often suggest things that I should read rather than tell me, "Do this" or "Do that." It would be, "Have you seen this?" or "Have you seen that?" Things he would point to me included everything from Julian Huxley to Darwin to anthropologist Ralph Linton and others, as well as things that other students were doing. For instance, Sherri Cavan you mentioned the other day.

Shalin: Yes, yes. I will send you her memoir. I had a very interesting conversation with her about Erving, about her writing a dissertation with him.

Clark: I would love to see anything that you feel free to send me.

Shalin: Certainly. So for about two years you carried on with this project.

Clark: That's correct.

Shalin: Then you decided enough is enough and told this to Goffman.

Clark: Oh, it wasn't quite like that. I did field work for two years and began to write my dissertation. I would show him what I wrote and what not, and then I was offered a teaching position at a Canadian university, and I had to pay rent. I spent there seven years altogether when I began to lose interest. I think that was a disappointment to him.

Shalin: He was disappointed.

Clark: I think so yes.

Shalin: Did he urge you to continue?

Clark: I don't think he ever remonstrated with me or urged me to do anything.

Shalin: He accepted your decision.

Clark: I believe so. That's correct.

Shalin: You said that you became a friend of Erving at some point.

Clark: Yes, Angela – let me call her Sky, as we all did – was a very troubled woman, manic-depressive, I guess. At times she would drive you crazy with all kinds of social invitations. We would go to her house, sometimes almost under duress – you had to accept the invitation and drop by her place to have a drink, because she was going nuts for lack of company or some such. Sometimes there would be 20 or 30 people when you showed up. Erving was not happy with this. He knew his wife was very sick. Other times she was in the dumps. At that time, the director of my organization, which by now was called "The Social Research Group," a woman called Genevieve Knupfer, was both a sociologist and a psychiatrist. She recognized Sky's problem and tried to intervene, suggesting this and that. I think Sky did end up in treatment for a long period of time, but her swings up and down got worse and worse and worse, and eventually, as you know, she jumped off the bridge.

Shalin: Right, in April of '64.

Clark: I went to Erving's home mostly through Sky's invitation, but sometimes through Erving's as well.

Shalin: Going back to how you encountered Schuyler – you met her at your research center.

Clark: That is true. We had a group . . . by the way we had only five people. I don't want it to sound like it was a large organization. I was there a few days after this organization had started.

Shalin: Who was there at the time besides you?

Clark: Ira Cisin was the boss. Genevieve Knupper was one of the participants. I think she was at Stanford University and then came to Berkeley on some part time basis. One of the research assistants – my goodness, what's his name – Peter Chromen [?] was his name. A woman whose name escapes me, perhaps it will come to me later. After a couple of years, Genevieve Knupper assumed the directorship of the organization and, I believe, she hired Sky. Sky was a clerical person. Well, much more than that, really, in terms of data collection, for this was a survey organization. We all participated in everything that was done. It was very comfortable for me.

Shalin: Hands-on group where everybody did everything.

Clark: Everybody did everything.

Shalin: She must have joined around, what, 1963?

Clark: It may be true, but I am terrible about dates or anything that I tell you in numerical form.

Shalin: That's OK. I am the same way when it comes to precise dates. It sounds like she worked for this organization no more than a year.

Clark: I'd have thought it was longer than that. . . . But as I say, don't depend on me for dates and such.

Shalin: I don't know if you knew Rodney Stark . . .

Clark: Sure.

Shalin: He told me Sky worked for the Survey Research Center.

Clark: That was also true, yes.

Shalin: Maybe she worked for both organizations simultaneously, or joined one after the other. I wonder what impression Sky left on you as an intellectual. At the University of Chicago she wrote a Master's thesis on personality traits of high class women, the topic overlapping with Erving's first article on "Symbols of Class Status" that came out in 1951.

Clark: My impression of Angela was much as you say. Her job was clerical, but that was not her demeanor [?] and that was not her function. She was a very bright lady; she was learned in social sciences. As I say, we all did everything, and although I don't think she ever published anything under her name, her hand was in everything.

Shalin: After her death, one of her teachers at the University of Chicago requested permission to publish parts of her Master's thesis. So it must have had merit.

Clark: I have not heard that. Who was a fellow at Chicago?

Shalin: It was a female professor, perhaps in the department of social work or human services, something like that. I have to look up the name. But the important thing is that she was intellectually alive, right?

Clark: Oh, very much so!

Shalin: And she was a good team player.

Clark: Oh, yes, yes.

Shalin: Would you say she was attractive as a person, as a woman?

Clark: My overall impression is that she was a very attractive person, very lively when she was not in her depressed state. Her physical appearance was very pleasant. I don't think she was a raving beauty in anybody's calendar, but she would leave an impression on anybody she met.

Shalin: And you say that she liked to invite a company for drinks at her home.

Clark: Often, and all kinds of people would show up.

Shalin: What kind of parties were these – small talk, some drink?

Clark: They were not organized. Are you familiar with Berkeley at all?

Shalin: Not really.

Clark: The Berkeley Hills are the nice place to live, and if you have money, you can have a very nice house on one of the hills overlooking the San Francisco Bay. They had one of such places with a huge deck. All of those people would stand around with a drink in their hands. There would be two or three people over there having a conversation, three or four wandering in and

out. They were not organized in any sense. People would drift off one by one, and that would be the end of the affair. I am not sure "party" is the word that expresses it.

Shalin: More like a social happy hour.

Clark: Yes, yes, that's a better choice of words.

Shalin: Was Erving part of any of that?

Clark: Oh, yes. I am sure he was.

Shalin: How would you describe interactions between Sky and Erving?

Clark: I think they were very comfortable with each other. There were no outward signs of affection in the physical sense. "Erv and Sky" was the way they addressed each other.

Shalin: They seemed to be on good terms, no tension.

Clark: I never saw any tension. I never saw anything except very comfortable relationship between them.

Shalin: Right. You suggested that Sky did have some mental issues. Some people say she was bipolar. Did you notice any mood swings?

Clark: Enormous. I use the term "manic depression" but "bipolar" would be fine. Yes, at times she would be hyper, and often when the gatherings at her house would take place. There would be people she ran into, some of these commercial contacts, some academics, some of the people from our own organization where we worked. Other times she would be depressed and perhaps wouldn't come to work.

Shalin: Mental issues Sky had were already apparent then.

Clark: Oh, yes, yes.

Shalin: How did you hear about Sky's death? Do you remember how the news reached you?

Clark: I don't remember who told me, but it was probably somebody at work who told me that she had died. I don't remember where I gathered information, but finally I knew that she had jumped off the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge to her death. That was a terrible loss for everyone, and that was certainly a terrible loss for Erving and Tom.

Shalin: Of course, it was.

Clark: She left a note in her car – she left the car on the bridge, and the note said, “Erv, Tom – I’m sorry.”

Shalin: You mentioned she was in treatment at that time.

Clark: I don’t know that for a fact, but I believe that is true. As I said, our director at that time, Genevieve Knupfer, who was a psychiatrist as well as a sociologist, was concerned about Sky. They were good friends as well as coworkers.

Shalin: I heard from at least two people that Schuyler was seeing a psychiatrist when Erving did his fieldwork at St. Elizabeth’s. Jordan Scher wrote [a letter to the editor where he said] that Sky had already tried to commit suicide in the late 50’s.

Clark: I didn’t know that.

Shalin: There might have been a pattern.

Clark: I am not surprised to hear that, but I didn’t know that.

Shalin: I don’t know if you have any opinion on that, but some of Erving’s writings strikes me as autobiographical. For instance, his paper “The Insanity of Place” that Erving wrote after Sky’s death and that describes a manic-depressive person [whose symptoms resemble those of Sky]. His *Asylums* might also have been influenced by the psychiatric treatment that Sky received in Bethesda. In the paper he wrote after Sky’s death Erving treats mental illness somewhat differently, acknowledging that in some cases it may have an organic basis.

Clark: I am not aware of those things, but if you remember the introduction to *Asylums*, he points out that it was psychiatrists who objected to what he had to say when his written materials came out. He says that psychiatrists could point out certain things that were not simply social constructs or matter of behavior, and Erving says that psychiatrists could certainly do that, but that his interest was in social interactions and ritual behavior that went on quite independent of any organic bases that might have been [implicated]. I don’t think he ever denied that there were organic bases. I think I referred earlier to the eclectic nature of things he referred to, including Darwin and Julian Huxley, *The Expression of Emotions in Animals*, and such. That is to say, he made a proper bow to the biologically determined aspects of all kinds of creatures, ourselves among them, but his concern was with describing the

ritual aspects, the constructs of rules. He was not concerned with the underlying causes of illness, wellness and such.

Shalin: Right. He carved out a niche for himself, studying how the disturbed person defies the rituals and conventions.

Did you form any impression of Erving's Jewishness? He was not observant, I understand.

Clark: None whatever. He was not a religious person, as far as I know. He had no interest in Jewish organizations. But as you well know, if you are a social scientist at a university, you will be surrounded by Jews. Lenny Bruce used to say, "If you are from New York, you are Jewish even if you aren't. And if you are not from New York, you are not Jewish." Everybody, myself included, and I am not Jewish, know all kinds of Yiddish expressions – "Mishuga this or that," all kinds of stuff. Erving certainly used them, but so did we all.

Shalin: Including Sammy Davis Jr.

Clark: I didn't hear, I am sorry.

Shalin: Including this comedian, Sammy Davis Jr. Perhaps I mispronounce his name.

Clark: Could you say his name again?

Shalin: Sammy Davis Junior, who was a member of the Rat Pack. So, Erving would use sometimes those expressions.

Clark: No more than anyone else, but yes.

Shalin: But he was not observant, so far as you can tell.

Clark: No.

Shalin: What about Erving's politics – did you notice any political orientation?

Clark: I never heard out of him a word about politics.

Shalin: You couldn't tell if he was leaning left or right.

Clark: Not to my knowledge.

Shalin: I have heard that among the reasons Erving left Berkeley was the impact that the student movement might have had on his.

Clark: I don't think it was the free speech movement itself, but Berkeley was wild place in the 1960s. There were all sorts of drugs, if-it-feels-good-do-it expressions, and I think that he was concerned, as any parent would be, that bad things could happen to a kid that grows up there. Let me also point out that he was given an invitation to come to the University of Pennsylvania to do whatever he pleased to do. You and I do not get offers like that.

Shalin: No-o-o. He got the Benjamin Franklin Professorship at Penn.

Clark: I am sorry, I have trouble hearing you.

Shalin: Erving was offered the Benjamin Franklin Professorship. That is the name of the chair he assumed.

Clark: Oh, yes.

Shalin: Another person who had it at Penn was Philip Rieff. I don't know if you know the guy.

Clark: I don't.

Shalin: He was part of the hiring process that brought Goffman to Penn. Anyway, Erving got a great gig at Penn. Did you keep in touch with Erving once you left Berkeley and after Erving went to Penn?

Clark: Less and less often as time went by, until finally, as I told you, I stopped doing it altogether and abandoned academia. I went back to Berkeley, however, and rejoined the organization, which by that time had a different name. It was called Social Research Group.

Shalin: When was it?

Clark: I am going to guess and say 74.

Shalin: Erving left Berkeley in 1968.

Clark: He was not at Berkeley when I returned.

Shalin: Do you remember how you learned about Erving's death?

Clark: I don't remember, but it was probably someone at work who told me – Ron Roisen [?] or Robin Room, but somebody did. Soon it was all over. Everybody who we knew Erving as well, and was greatly concerned. Somehow I know that Erving was gravely ill before he died, but I didn't know that it was as serious as it was.

Shalin: You didn't communicate with Erving in the last few years of his life.

Clark: That is correct, I did not.

Shalin: You didn't see much of him after you came back to Berkeley.

Clark: He was gone by then.

Shalin: You did not see him at any meetings.

Clark: I have no recollection of seeing him after that, but that might be inaccurate.

Shalin: Going back to your graduate years, could you tell me what kinds of hobbies Erving had? Anything you did together – skiing, playing cards . . .

Clark: None of those things, but . . . Well, it was not with me, but if you are interested, I mentioned Ira Cisin a couple of times, the statistician who was a head of our group. Ira and Erv were good friends, both were interested in dealing black jack. Remember there was an upsurge in the notion of counting cards in black jack?

Shalin: Yes.

Clark: Erving was very skilled at that. Of course he was learning the raw material from Ira Cisin, the statistician. They often would go to Lake Tahoe, but perhaps Reno as well, to play black jack. Finally, one day – I think it was at Lake Tahoe, Ira and Erving were counting cards religiously, and as Erv or Ira put it, a couple of biggest men he ever saw walked up behind them and said, "We don't want your play, partner."

Shalin: [Laughing].

Clark: After that, as you well know given where you live, they went to dealing out of a shoe and using multiple decks and if they suspected you counting cards, they would often close the game down.

Shalin: I could never understand the concept of "counting cards." It's like telling someone playing chess that you can count 10 moves ahead but not 12. If you do so, you are cheating.

Clark: All these things are correct, but the gambling houses do not look upon it that way.

Shalin: That's right, but I just don't understand it.

Clark: I don't understand that either, except they do not like to lose [laughing].

Shalin: Now, did Erving mention to you this story about counting cards or you heard it from someone else?

Clark: I may have heard it from Erv, but I may have heard it from Ira Cisin. I don't know.

Shalin: I also heard that Angelica Schuyler was good at playing cards.

Clark: Yes, she did go to casinos and play cards, of course, but I think she was primarily playing bridge, and was a good at it, I am told.

Shalin: Interesting. So Erving was serious about playing cards.

Clark: It was not serious in a sense that he hoped to make money. He was not a poor man, as you know. But the notion pleased him greatly, and of course, it was a place where he could exercise his talent [studying] how people behaved.

Shalin: He did conduct a study and was planning to write a book about casino culture and gambling, but it never was published.

Clark: There was talk of that. I didn't know it reached the stage when he was formally planning to do it, but he was gathering tidbits from everybody about their experiences in gambling houses. There was a woman who had been a dealer at Tahoe, and he was interested in her stories about the mechanics, so-called, people who could manipulate a deck of cards, who worked for gambling halls.

Shalin: She was a dealer Erving knew.

Clark: I knew her; she may or may not have been a graduate student, but she had been [a dealer] when she was a young lady.

Shalin: I see. She had the experience.

Clark: That is correct. He was interested in what went on among people who worked in those establishments, how they dealt with each other and how they dealt with the public.

Shalin: I heard from Melvin Kohn that Erving was training to become a dealer in Las Vegas, and that one day Mel got a letter from the Las Vegas sheriff,

asking about “one Erving Goffman” who named him as a character reference.

Clark: That is a delightful story. I have not heard that. I like it.

Shalin: So cards was one thing Erving enjoyed playing. Any other hobbies he had?

Clark: . . . He may well have gone skiing, as you mentioned, and I didn’t know. He may well have done all kinds of things.

Shalin: Would you visit him at his home, go out to eat, anything you personally did with Erving?

Clark: Almost entirely my knowledge of Erving came from the things you have mentioned – gatherings at his home, interactions at the university, all kinds of various things.

Shalin: How would you describe his home besides the fact that it overlooked the Bay Area?

Clark: It was beautifully furnished with quite a few antiques, lovely things I know nothing about now and knew less then. He would care very much about, say, a piece of furniture.

Shalin: He was a serious collector.

Clark: I don’t think the word “collector” is the one I would use, but he certainly had them. I don’t know if that was him or Sky or both.

Shalin: Right. Somebody mentioned in a memoir or interview that Erving and Sky were separated at some point in the 60s.

Clark: I don’t know anything of that, no.

Shalin: Any other episodes come to mind about your interactions with Erving?

Clark: None comes to mind at this moment, but you certainly stirred up my memories, and if I can think of anything . . .

Shalin: Maybe when you read the transcript, right. Along with the transcript, I will send you a few interviews. I am most grateful for your time, Walter. Just a little bit more, if you can bear with me. I would like to ask you

about other teachers at Berkeley who made an impression on you. For instance, did you take classes with Herbert Blumer?

Clark: I did.

Shalin: What impression did he left on you as a teacher, as a person?

Clark: Well, Blumer was one of the older teachers on the staff. Remember, he was a professional football player, a very large man. Even in his 60s he was a very impressive physical man. He had very little use for Talcott Parsons, very little use for quantitative analysis, very little use for all manner of things. He was interested in observational things, and of course, he was always promoting George Herbert Mead as the answer to everything – the beginning, the middle and the end.

Shalin: That's what he was teaching in his classes.

Clark: Absolutely.

Shalin: And how was he with students?

Clark: Very pleasant man. He was quite formal. You would never think of referring to him anything except "Professor Blumer," but he was a friendly guy.

Shalin: What about Bendix?

Clark: I don't know how Erving and Reinhard got along. I don't think I ever saw them together.

Shalin: Did you take classes from Bendix?

Clark: Oh, yes. Sure.

Shalin: I am trying to see which other Berkeley professors you found memorable. What kind of teacher was Bendix?

Clark: Well, I didn't know him other than as a student. He was quite formal in his presentations. He also was an affable man, but perhaps less so than either Blumer or certainly Goffman. Of course, if you want to know all about Max Weber, that's where you went.

Shalin: Was he a popular teacher?

Clark: I think he was highly respected as a teacher, someone everybody wanted to know and study with. I am not sure it was required. [He might have taught] a required theory course.

Shalin: What about Martin Lipset?

Clark: Martin Lipset was a very gregarious man. Bendix and Lipset worked together, but they were a very strange combination: one very formal, the other was not at all. Lipset was the informal one, of course.

Shalin: Lipset was a formal one?

Clark: No, Bendix was a formal one.

Shalin: OK. Did you take any classes with Lipset?

Clark: Seminar, I believe, but I won't depend on my memory for that.

Shalin: What was his teaching style?

Clark: Lots of interactions with students. Students would talk, he would respond, he would say something, students would respond, and so forth.

Shalin: Lots of interchange.

Clark: Lots of interchange, yes. No formal lecturing.

Shalin: What about Philip Selznick?

Clark: I don't have any recollections of him at all.

Shalin: He was not part of your educational experience.

Clark: He could have been, but I don't remember the man, and perhaps that is a comment in itself [**laughing**].

Shalin: OK. Do you remember Charles Glock?

Clark: Sure! Charlie Glock was the head of the Survey Research group.

Shalin: And chairman of the department at some point.

Clark: I think so, yes.

Shalin: He wrote a memoir on Goffman and Blumer which is posted in the Goffman archives.

Clark: I was a survey research creature, and so I came to [interact] with him and a whole bunch of other people in that setting. I don't think I ever took a course with him, or anything like that. But we did a lot of work using survey research facilities, computer, sampling, and all manners of things.

Shalin: How was he as an administrator?

Clark: I don't know.

Shalin: Well, if I may in closing, I would like to ask you about Erving's scholarship. How did it hold over the course of time?

Clark: I wanted to ask you about that. Certainly, Erving was important to me before I came to Berkeley. He was incredibly important not only to me, I think, but to everyone during the 1960s – 1970s. Is he still important, do people still refer to Goffman the way they refer to, say, Weber or Durkheim?

Shalin: In my view, the answer is "yes." I think Erving was a genius. He was highly unusual; it is very hard to do the kind of sociology Erving was doing. He had a literary gift . . .

Clark: All true.

Shalin: Few people can observe things and write the way Erving could. There is no school of Goffman sociology, so far as I can tell, the way there is the school of ethnomethodology, for instance. Erving did not leave behind a method one could readily follow.

Clark: I don't think anyone ever matched him, although a whole bunch of students, including Cavan and other people, who tried to do what he did and, while they produced acceptable results, they didn't have the sparkle of brilliance that only Erving had had. . . . But I was interested in what you said about there being no Goffman school in a sense of others who follow him. Freud being perhaps the biggest example of someone people followed forever and ever.

Shalin: It's just that there is no algorithm you can follow to achieve results when you want to do Goffman style sociology. You have to have a keen eye, have a way with words, be infinitely inventive conceptually, and then somehow put it all together – it's very hard to do.

Clark: I found it impossible [**laughing**].

Shalin: Yes, yes. Walter, it's been wonderful. I appreciate your giving so generously your time. I will transcribe our conversation and send you the transcript, along with some other interviews and memoirs I have collected.

Clark: I would love to receive it.

Shalin: Great. Thank you so much.

Clark: Thank you.

[End of the Recording]

August 7, 2009

Enclosed is an edited version of our conversation. I have deleted or altered only things that, upon reflection, I am less sure of than I may have sounded at the time. The things I recall are those of an old man looking back more than 40 years – an old man who could not tell you what he was doing one year ago. Beware! Goffman was a wonder. I thought so then, I still think so. I am delighted you are gathering the impressions and memoirs of those who knew him. His published works are much admired; they are not extended. This is one giant upon whose shoulders no one yet has stood.

Walter Clark.