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Remembering Erving Goffman

Gary Alan Fine: Goffman Turns to Me and Says, “Only a Schmuck Studies His Own Life”

This conversation with Gary Alan Fine, John Evans Professor of Sociology at Northwestern University, was recorded over the phone on August 21, 2009. Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, after which Dr. Fine edited the transcript and approved posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. 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 “[?]”.

Shalin: Greetings, this is Dmitri Shalin. Gary?

Fine: OK, you would like to begin by talking about how I first came across Goffman’s work.

Shalin: Yes, yes.

Fine: Just to give you a little background, I grew up in New York City, born in 1950. As an undergraduate I attended the University of Pennsylvania. When I was there, I guess it was my sophomore year, which would have been 1969-1970. I don’t quite recall whether it was fall semester or spring semester, but I took introduction to sociology. It was pretty much a standard course in functionalist sociology at that point. But we had a section of 25 students, with a section leader. He was supposed to teach us something beyond the lecture. The section leader I had was a young man named Adrian Brancato. He was studying criminology and deviance, if my memory serves. He had us read *Asylums* for the class.

Shalin: Was he a graduate student?

Fine: He was a graduate student, yes. My background . . . my father was a fairly prominent New York psychoanalyst. So reading Goffman’s *Asylums* was very exciting for me, very interesting, because in many ways it provided a critique of what my father was doing.

Shalin: Interesting.

Fine: As a psychoanalyst he wasn’t working in mental institutions; he had a private practice. Still, it provided a critique of the standard psychiatric enterprise. Obviously, I had known something about psychoanalysis. The summer between my first and second year I actually worked for a psychoanalytic researcher at NYU. So I was fairly familiar with the psychoanalytic and psychiatric models. What Goffman did was to provide

some critique of these models in sociological terms. I thought his writing was not only very witty and very well written; it was also intellectually very compelling. If I recall correctly, Brancato told us that Goffman had just joined the faculty. I can't remember the timing details, whether he was on campus. I think he had not started teaching.

Shalin: He came to Penn in 1968.

Fine: If he came to Penn in 68, this would have been his second year there. I honestly don't remember at this point . . . first of all, I don't remember when Goffman came to campus as opposed to when he was hired. I also am not sure when he started to teach at Penn. He was a Benjamin Franklin distinguished research professor, and my understanding was that they could teach as much or as little as they wanted. I am not sure if Goffman ever taught an undergraduate course. The courses I took with him were both graduate courses. I don't know what he did during the 1970s, but I don't think he was teaching [undergraduates].

Shalin: I am not aware of him teaching any undergraduate classes at Penn.

Fine: Right, I am not aware of it either. When would that have been – I think it was a spring term of 1970, and he was offering a class called "Social Organizations" in the anthropology department. I think it was "Anthropology 529." I had read *Asylums*, and if I am recalling correctly, Erving had said that seniors can take this course if they wished to. I was a junior at the time, but I had enough credit to be counted as a senior. So I went to his teaching assistant and explained that, and I was permitted to take the class. The class [consisted in] Goffman's reading from his notes on *Frame Analysis*. So once a week for two or three hours we would come in and he would read in this very dry voice whatever he was writing at this point in *Frame Analysis*. I think it was not a terribly successful class for most students, but I thought it was great. I was ready for this; it connected with some other classes I was taking. I took classes with Dell Hymes, David Sapir, and later with Ray Birdwhistell, so there was a group of men at Penn at that point interested in similar kinds of issues. I was not involved in research, but I was taking those kinds of classes. . . . I am not sure of the timing here. What happened next was that I took a more advanced graduate class with Goffman which was offered through the Annenberg School of Communications. What I remember, and this is now 40 years ago, that the first day of class . . .

Shalin: Sorry I interrupt you, Gary, do you remember the title of this class?

Fine: Yes, what I remember, again, maybe wrongly, it was "Communications 710." It was a 700 level class. It probably didn't have a terribly meaningful

title. . . . I don't think I should even guess. I think there were about 25 or 30 people in the room the first day. . . . We went around the table, and Goffman basically told people whether or not they could take the class. If I recall correctly, he threw all the sociologists out. He let me stay because he liked the paper that I had done for his first class. And I think he also liked the fact that I was an undergraduate, and I had chutzpa and was willing to stand up and do this. I think there were three faculty members who took the class. I think Bill Labov was in that class, not taking it but sitting in. Maybe Klaus Scherer and maybe about 7 to 10 graduate students and me. . . . Scherer was in psychology department, and paraverbal communications, the way voice tone conveys emotional messages. I believe he is at the University of Geneva. At any rate, this group of us were talking about particular bodies of data. I believe Goffman was working at this time on what became *Gender Advertisements*. He was collecting advertisements with men and women in them, and in the process he was learning how to use various kinds of technology, how to make images of these advertisements, and so forth.

Either during this class or after, I became an unpaid research assistant. One other thing he was also doing in this period was looking at bloopers, which was based on radio talk and [would become] his essays in *Forms of Talk*. What he had done was tape-record on these reel-to-reel tapes the set of blooper records of Kermit Schafer [Schafer had made a career of collecting errors on radio and television and then placing the mistakes or gaffes – bloopers – on LP records. Many of the bloopers were actually recreations of broadcast errors]. He wanted to be able to listen to the categories of bloopers to develop a theory of mistakes in talk. For instance, there were case in which the announcer flooded at and began to laugh. I cannot remember how many categories we had, but what we did, myself and a graduate student, we would take those tapes and splice them together. Do you remember those reels?

Shalin: Oh, yes.

Fine: You had to be very careful to splice them at the end of wherever the text was, put the spliced tapes into piles, and then splice them back together. So that was our responsibility.

Shalin: So you were Goffman's research assistant, right?

Fine: Well, I guess you can call it that. Because I wasn't being paid, I didn't have a formal title, but I was basically a research assistant.

Shalin: It was at his invitation.

Fine: It must have been. You know, maybe he asked, "Is there anyone who can help me with this?" and I raised my hand, and this other student did. I didn't need funding, so it was just an interesting thing to do. Certainly, I admired his work and reading a fair amount of his work and the work of the people he admired, like Gregory Bateson and William Fry.

When it was time to apply for graduate school – I think it was at the same time when I was taking the second course, the fall quarter of '71. It must have been at this point when I asked him for advice about graduate school. Either I asked him or he offered to write letters of recommendations for me, which he did. And I was pretty successful at getting into graduate schools. I am sure his letters didn't hurt me and may have helped quite a bit. On occasion he would invite me to his home on Society Hill, a very elegant area in Philadelphia. We would sit together and talk about my career, the kind of things professors and undergraduates would do. Not talk about his career so much, although I might have asked him questions about particular things we were reading; not that I would ask about his life. He was interested in what was happening in my life. In retrospect, it may have been related to his son, who is probably around 60 now . . .

Shalin: Tom Goffman was born in 1953. He is in his late '50s.

Fine: Yes. He and I would have been close in age.

Shalin: Did you interact with him?

Fine: No, no. At this point I didn't know that Goffman had a son. I didn't even know if [Goffman] was married. Undergraduates don't ask their professors about their personal life.

Shalin: Of course.

Fine: We didn't do that. But there were a few professors, because this is the late '60s, some of whom would tell you more than you might want to know, but not Erving. Anyway, he told me I shouldn't go to graduate school in sociology. He thought I should go to graduate school in anthropology, which was not something I was interested in, because I was not particularly good at languages, and I thought as an anthropologist you must be able to pick up languages. I wasn't particularly interested in going to some, quote, "tribal society." We don't talk about tribal societies now, and anthropologists can study their home cultures, but back in the early 1970s you were supposed to have your own island or tribe, and I wasn't so interested in that. But I was interested in social psychology and applied to graduate schools in social psychology. Eventually, I was admitted into, I think, seven different

programs and chose Harvard's Psychology and Social Relations. When I was on the job market, this allowed me to get a job offer in sociology at Minnesota.

There are a couple of stories I should mention. One has to do with the paper I wrote for the first class that I took with Erving, which was on frame breaking in French surrealist theater. Goffman liked it, and eventually used it in *Frame Analysis*.

Shalin: Did he cite you?

Fine: He certainly did. I should mention that he was very definitive, very forceful in emphasizing that we should cite him whenever we used any ideas of his, and that in turn he would cite us.

Shalin: Did he explain why?

Fine: Well, I cannot remember clearly, but I remember that he did that. I can't remember how far he went in explaining it. There was a sense that it is [part] of academic ethics. It was an ethical issue, and it was clearly an issue of intellectual rights. I guess it is sort of ironic if you think of *Presentation of Self*, which most people would suggest [is] rather undercited – not a lot of detailed citations in *Presentation of Self* to other sociologists.

Shalin: If I could interrupt you for a second – do you still have that paper?

Fine: I rewrote the paper at two subsequent points. So I have it somewhere. I don't know if I have the paper that I submitted to Goffman.

Shalin: But some revised version may exist.

Fine: Oh, yes. I thought about publishing it, but the problem I ran into was that I can't speak French. All that I was doing was using translated works, and that never seemed proper.

Shalin: We have several papers posted on our site that Goffman's students wrote for his classes, papers written by Michael Delaney who was at Penn about the same time as you; papers and exams written by Sherri Cavan, and others. We also have syllabi, reading lists, and similar materials pertaining to Goffman's teaching.

Fine: He liked that paper a lot. This is what got me into the class with advanced graduate students. I suspect he probably mentioned it in his letter of recommendation.

Shalin: You have never seen that letter, but it was probably a good one.

Fine: I don't even know if it was a good one.

. . .

Fine: At any rate, where was I?

Shalin: Goffman liked your paper, and he urged you to do mutual citing.

Fine: He did this in the class to emphasize the [importance] of mutual citing. He did cite my paper in *Frame Analysis*. Now – he cited it wrong.

Shalin: Wrong?

Fine: I was [talking about] a particular French play, and when *Frame Analysis* came out, the name of the play was misspelled. I was so embarrassed because I assumed that I had made a mistake. I was still in graduate school. I just said, "Oh, my God, I spoiled the book!"

Shalin: [Laughing].

Fine: It was years later, probably after I got my Ph.D. that I went back and looked at the paper. And I was right.

Shalin: The mistake was not yours.

Fine: It was his mistake.

Shalin: [Laughing]. That's funny.

Fine: I was terribly ashamed [laughing].

Shalin: Still, no one knows, and this is your chance to let the world know the truth [laughing].

Fine: I know, I know. It is my chance to square that up. The other story – this would have been in the spring quarter of 1972, spring semester. My wife and I were getting married. Susan is from a very well established Jacksonville, Florida, family. We were going to have a very large wedding!

Shalin: How large, if I may ask?

Fine: I think we sent out about 800 invitations.

Shalin: Wow! That is big.

Fine: And almost all of them were people in Jacksonville. There might have been 25 friends and people from New York, you know. It was a society wedding. Susan [my wife] was a debutante, and my in-laws were quite well established. At one point I suggested to Erving that I should study my own wedding in light of impression management. He turns to me and says, "Only a schmuck studies his own life."

Shalin: [Laughing].

Fine: I remember that [laughing].

Shalin: Most interesting and important, given Erving's own writing, some of which, I think, is a kind of self-ethnography. But go ahead.

Fine: I don't think what he has written is personal in that way. I mean there are people like Fred Davis who would study his own life. He was a cab driver, so he wrote in 1959 this paper on cab drivers. There is a sense that if you do something you should just study it. If you think about ethnographers, there are a bunch of people who do that. I guess Erving sort of convinced me never to do that. I never studied my own life, despite of the fact that people believe that I have. John Lofland and his co-authors claimed in "Analyzing Social Settings" that I studied high school debate because of my son, but that's not true. My oldest son was in third-grade at the time.

Shalin: So the imputation of the biographical linkage is wrong in your case.

Fine: That is exactly correct.

Shalin: I am glad to have this on record.

Fine: I always was a little frustrated because I use the Anderson-Lofland-Snow text, and I have to tell my students that the part about me is just not right. At any rate, that is more or less the story I have to tell. After I left to go to graduate school, we would communicate on rare occasion, but not closely. When Goffman became president, he asked me to be on an invited ASA panel, which I did.

Shalin: Do you remember which panel it was?

Fine: It was actually September 1982. It was the ASA meeting in San Francisco.

Shalin: Then he didn't attend it.

Fine: That's correct. He was not in this session, [which was titled] "Didactic Seminar on Fieldwork."

Shalin: He asked you to join this panel.

Fine: He asked me to be a participant.

Shalin: I've been jotting down some notes in the hope of going back and asking you some follow-up questions.

Fine: Sure.

Shalin: I know you have things to do, so we can stop at any time, Gary, and what we don't finish, maybe we can talk about in the future. You said Erving liked your paper; he must have talked to you about it. Do you remember his comments, the setting where the conversation took place? Or was it something written?

Fine: Well, I am sure it was written. I am not saying it was only written. I do not remember at this point specific conversation about the paper, but I do remember that I got "A" in the course and that he liked it.

Shalin: Chances are his comments are on the paper, or at least the grade is there. It is of some historical interest . . .

Fine: Very minor interest [**laughing**]. . . . If someone put that in a biography, that would be really stretching it.

Shalin: He might have written something substantive, like he did to Michael Delaney whom Erving had asked to read the manuscript of *Frame Analysis*. They had an exchange about it, which is posted on our web site, just like Sherri Cavan's term paper with Erving's grade and comment. Another thing I meant to ask you, Gary, if I may, and you would be just the right person to ask, what is your take on Erving's Jewishness?

Fine: Now, let's separate religion and culture.

Shalin: Right.

Fine: I never had a sense that Erving was religious, but culturally he was very Jewish – a cynical, sarcastic kind of person like those I grew up with in New York. I told you a story of Erving telling me only a schmuck would study his own life. . . . As best I can remember, he might well have used, let's say, common Yiddish expressions like "schmuck," nothing more substantial than

that. Some people would use Yiddish expression indicating knowledge of the language; I don't recall that in his case.

Shalin: Renee Fox, who chaired the sociology department at Penn and who gave an interesting interview, compared Erving to Woody Allan. Sam Heilman had important observations as well. But in any event, no evidence that Erving was interested in religion and had an affiliation.

Fine: Right. He was Jewish in a particular cynical way, skeptical way. Obviously, his name would provide the double clue – “Erving” and “Goffman.”

Shalin: Although “Erving” spelled with “E” is not necessarily a Jewish name. His friends at Chicago used to joke, “Here comes Erving with an ‘E.’” Saul Mendlovitz remembers that.

Do you have any sense of Erving's politics? I have some conflicting observations about that.

Fine: Unlike some faculty remembers who would occasionally make political diatribes, particularly on the left, you didn't get that sense from Goffman. I can't remember any particular examples, but there was a general skepticism of American politics. Given that we were talking [during] the Nixon administration, it was aimed at Nixon and the culture of class that Nixon reflected. But I don't remember any sense of the political commitment [on Goffman's part]. He would always, or at least routinely, dress down, often wear sweat shirts, and so forth.

Shalin: Any more memories of the way Erving dressed up and presented himself?

Fine: He was like this; he didn't look like a professor; he wasn't a person, if I recall, who took much note of the occasion of teaching. One could say he was comfortable, but in retrospect, you could say this was a statement.

Shalin: So he was dressing informally.

Fine: That's my memory.

Shalin: And he was not wearing his politics on his sleeves, aside from showing his skepticism about authority.

Fine: Yes. I had a sense that he was anti-authority, but he was also . . . there are these stories about his investments. I mean he was, I gather, someone who liked to live well.

Shalin: His will shows his assets were substantial. Would Erving comment on that in class?

Fine: What?

Shalin: Would Erving bring up his financial portfolio in class?

Fine: No, no. I don't think so. It is from what other people told me. I was told that there was some animosity or resentment in the Penn department because Goffman got a salary that was quite high for the period. He was far better paid than any of his colleagues, or most of his colleagues.

Shalin: Anything else on Erving's relationship with his sociology colleagues at Penn? He didn't spend much time in this department.

Fine: Well, I was an undergraduate, so I didn't know what was going with the faculty. It was clear from two courses I took – one was in anthropology, one in communications – that he could teach whatever he wanted, being Benjamin Franklin professor. He would not admit, in that particular year, any of the sociology graduate students in his advanced seminar. In that period, in 1970-72, he was somewhat alienated from sociology, and I assume not just from the department but from the discipline.

Shalin: What is your take on that, on his ambivalence about the discipline?

Fine: I am not sure it was ambivalence [**laughing**]. I think he was hostile.

Shalin: OK, how do you read his hostility toward sociology? And why would he run for ASA presidency?

Fine: Well, I think by 1980, it changed to some extent. Maybe he also wanted to . . . Well, I am not going to psychoanalyze him. But I think in the 1970s Goffman was probably a different person than 10 years later.

Shalin: Deborah Schiffrin wrote a memoir where she remembers Goffman telling her, "Don't go into sociology, go into linguistics."

Fine: Yes.

Shalin: In your case it was anthropology he urged you to take.

Fine: Oh, yes. That was very explicit. I can't tell you how much of it was alienation from the department and how much from the discipline. Remember, also, that Erving was at Harvard for a year, and it was in political science with Tom Schelling.

Shalin: One person who claims credit for bringing Erving to Penn was Philip Rieff. People say the relationship between the two was “complex.” Did you have a chance to take classes with Philip Rieff?

Fine: Yes, I did.

Shalin: Do you know anything about Erving’s bid for ASA presidency?

Fine: No, I don’t know anything about it.

Shalin: There was a grass root movement to recruit him.

Fine: Yes. Was John Lofland behind that?

Shalin: I think so.

Fine: That was 30 years ago. I remember John strategizing how to get Goffman elected the president and running a little bit of a political campaign. John can tell that story. I don’t remember it, other than in a very vague sense. I don’t even remember if Goffman was a write-in candidate.

Shalin: I think so. Once it came for a vote, he was on the ballot, but to get him there took a grass root campaign.

Fine: It was a petition. He had to get petitions. I think that happened with Al Lee.

Shalin: Bill Gamson recalls the ASA council deliberations from that period in his memoir. When the petitions came in, the first question that council members had was, “Are you sure Erving would even be interested to stand for the election?” To their surprise he said yes. Sherri Cavan remembers asking Erving why would he consider running for ASA presidency, given that he never served on any committees, and the answer Goffman gave, according to Sherri, was, “That would finally validate me.”

Fine: Interesting. In my memory, his was the only ASA meeting that had no [program] theme.

Shalin: I am not sure that was the only case, but this was extremely unusual. Do you recall Erving’s presidential address being delivered in his absence?

Fine: My recollection is that it was not given.

Shalin: It wasn’t read by someone else?

Fine: That is my recollection.

Shalin: I've heard from someone that John Lofland had presented the address in lieu of Goffman.

Fine: I don't think so. Obviously, John would know if he had read it. I think it was just cancelled. . . .

Shalin: Erving's presidential address was published in the ASR in early 1983.

Fine: I think it is in the text that Erving talks about it not being given.

Shalin: He does. He sort of places himself in the shoes of the audience reading the address when he is no longer around. The address has a few self-reflective loops where he alludes to the address after the demise of the writer, which appears to show his awareness of the fact that he would not be around when the address reaches its audience. Some accounts have Erving working on his address and putting finishing touches on it till the very end.

You mentioned visiting Erving's home in Philadelphia – anything stands out in your mind about the layout of the house?

Fine: I remember that it was very elegant. You know, I cannot tell you if it was French provincial or some other style, but it was one of the best neighborhoods of Philadelphia. I saw only public parts of the house; I didn't see private spaces; but it wasn't filled with junk and boxes. It was very nice.

Shalin: Anything else you recall about your interactions with Erving on your visits with him?

Fine: He always talked to me in a sort of paternal way, caring way, not that he was trying to be my father. He was genuinely interested in me and my success.

Shalin: And he obviously kept track of you judged from the fact that he offered you a place on the ASA panel.

Fine: By then I was tenured faculty member.

Shalin: Did you ask him to support your tenure application?

Fine: No, it didn't work that way.

Shalin: Once you left for Harvard there were no regular communications between the two of you.

Fine: Right. I don't want to say we never communicated, or that we never talked, but . . . I wouldn't have dinner with him at the ASA. We didn't have that kind of a relationship. We had a friendly relationship, maybe saying "Hello" or "How are you doing?"

Shalin: Do you remember meeting Eviatar Zerubavel during your years at Penn?

Fine: No, Eviatar was not at Penn.

Shalin: He wrote his dissertation with Goffman.

Fine: I know he did. I am not saying he wasn't at Penn. I am saying he wasn't at Penn when I was there. I don't remember when Eviatar came to Penn.

Shalin: I think it was in the '70s, mid-'70s. That must have been past your time.

Fine: I left in '72.

Shalin: Right, he came later.

Fine: I think he got his degree in '76, '77.

Shalin: The reason I bring him up is that he recalls a similar treatment Goffman gave to sociology students who had signed up for his classes. Eviatar himself barely made it after coming all the way from Israel and pleading with Erving to let him take his class.

Fine: Well, it's an obdurate reality [**laughing**]. We all remember the same Erving Goffman.

Shalin: That is part of this project. The idea is not just to reconstruct Erving's persona but also inquire how interpersonal events are coming to language and transmitted over time. For instance, I have several accounts of what happened when a police officer came to tell Goffman that his wife had just committed suicide. Three or four different accounts of what happened at the time cast some light on how collective memory works.

Fine: I know. That story makes the rounds, and everybody tells it in his own way.

Shalin: Have you heard it?

Fine: Sure.

Shalin: What's your version?

Fine: Well, I probably heard several versions. The version I heard, which I always assumed was apocryphal, was that he was teaching a graduate seminar at Berkeley. Someone came to the class and said, "Professor Goffman, I have the news for you that you should know, and I wonder if you could come out outside so I could tell you." And he said, "No, no, you tell me here." There was a little back and forth. Goffman still insisted, and the messenger said, "Professor Goffman, your wife just committed suicide." The story is that Goffman then spent the rest of his class talking about how one gives that kind of message.

Shalin: Fascinating! I haven't heard that version. That's the fifth one, I think.

Fine: At any rate, that's the version I had heard.

Shalin: I imagine it would be hard to trace its provenance.

Fine: Well, obviously I was not a student, and I never believed that the story was literally true.

Shalin: Right, but even as an apocryphal story it tells us something about the public perception of Erving's persona.

Shalin: Thank you so much, Gary.

[End of the Recording]