

2-16-2009

I Became Aware That Many Students Looked up to Erving

Gerald Handel
City University of New York

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

Handel, G. (2009). I Became Aware That Many Students Looked up to Erving. In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-3.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/33

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

Gerald Handel: I Became Aware That Many Students Looked up to Erving

Gerald Handel, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at The City College and The Graduate Center of the City University of New York, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. The memoir was received on February 11, 2009.

[Posted 02-16-09]

I was aware of Erving at a distance before I met him, when we were both students at The University of Chicago in the late 1940s and early 50s. He was older than I (two years older, I later learned) and much further along in his studies than I. He was in sociology while I was in the interdisciplinary Committee on Human Development, whose curriculum included courses in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and biology. I knew a lot of sociology students, went to some of their parties, played softball with them in the Ray Elementary Schoolyard during the Spring for probably three years. Erving was never a participant in the softball games. Fellow players I do remember included Joe Gusfield, Fred Davis, Bernard Karsh, Jack London, Jacob Feldman, Bill Kornhauser, Hans Mauksch, Dan Lortie, Robert Habenstein, Lou Kriesberg, philosophy student Richard Jeffrey. I think Howie Becker also played, but I'm not certain. After the game, many of us would go to Ken and Jocks, one of the first pizza restaurants. From these various contacts and situations I became aware that many of them looked up to Erving. I did not know the details but sensed that they placed him in a special category.

I lived on the 4th floor of a tenement building consisting of apartments that had been cut up into small units mostly rented to students. Angelica Schuyler Choate, a fellow student in human development, who later became Erving's first wife, lived on the third floor. She did not use her first name. Everybody knew her and addressed her as Schuyler. She came from a high status family; I heard (not from her but I don't remember from whom) that her father was the publisher of *The Boston Herald*. Except for the fact that she had a car when not many students did, there was absolutely nothing about her presence or demeanor that communicated status or money. I never heard her talk about her background. The car was a small one. She is the first person I remember who went around in jeans, which were not fashionable in 1949-51. We had a friendly acquaintanceship but were not friends. I remember her as pleasant but somewhat tense. She and I and two other students wrote our MA qualifying exams together.

One day there was a knock on my door. I opened it to see Schuyler, who said "Gerry, this is Erving," and there he was standing behind her. He was just back from his year in the Shetlands. He came into the room, walked past me to take a quick look at my bookcase and pronounced "standard stuff." I was startled and offended by this nasty way of introducing himself.

While I have never forgotten this unpleasant introduction, we had friendlier, though infrequent, interactions after that. I don't remember much about them. I do recall a conversation with him and Schuyler in which we briefly discussed Parsons, whose book with Bales, *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (1955), had been published a short time before. The title summed up exactly what I was working on, and I was concerned about its possible relation to my efforts, not yet crystallized in a product. I do not recall anything of what was said in that conversation, although I can place it in 1956. During an ASA meeting in San Francisco (I don't remember the year) I was at a party at his house in the Berkeley hills, but I recall nothing of it except the beautiful vista toward San Francisco Bay.

In 1972, when I was an associate professor at CCNY and applied for promotion to professor, I was required to submit the names of five references. One name I submitted was Erving Goffman. I do not recall what my feelings about that were – whether I felt confident that he would give me a good reference or whether I was taking a risk that I believed worth taking. I did not, of course, see any of the letters. But my chairman told me that Erving had said complimentary things about my work on families and had asked why I hadn't been promoted to professor much earlier. Since my promotion went through on the first try, I have to assume that Erving's letter, and the others, were supportive. The book I co-authored with Robert D. Hess, *Family Worlds* (University of Chicago Press 1959) was in no way "standard stuff." It was the first study of families based on interviews with both parents and all their two or three children between the ages of six and eighteen. It was un-Parsonian, a symbolic interactionist work that was inspired by Cooley's concept of the family as a primary group and Burgess's characterization of "the family as a unity of interacting personalities." One of the publisher's reviewers said it "breaks new ground in the social psychology of the family." With Lee Rainwater and Richard P. Coleman I had also co-authored *Workingman's Wife* (1969), a study of working-class housewives. That was innovative in a different way.

At the last ASA meeting Erving attended before his death, (1981, I believe), I was standing talking to someone in a hallway or reception room. By chance, Erving came by, walked between us and, without looking and without breaking his stride put the back of his hand on my stomach and said "Watch that" and continued on. One-upmanship was his steady strategy for interaction.

September 6, 2011

In the late forties I took two year-long courses, each of which offered different lecturers twice a week, along with a discussion section leader once/wk. I heard two or three lectures by Blumer and disliked him. As I remember, each lecture was an extended rant about what was wrong with the way everybody else was doing things, and I was sitting there wanting guidance on what's the right way to do things., which, to the best of my recollection, he didn't offer. So I didn't take Blumer's social psychology course. When he went to Pittsburgh for two years as mediator in the steel industry I took the course as taught by Guy Swanson, who was a superb teacher and gave a great course. In later years, I found Blumer's book helpful, and I feel positive about him. I will send you a copy of my just published chapter, "Sociological Perspectives on Social Development," and you can see how central Mead and Blumer became in my thinking.