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Remembering Erving Goffman

Travis Hirschi: A “Variable” Researcher’s Memories of Erving Goffman

Dr. Travis Hirschi, regents Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 02-13-12]

In *Stigma* (p. 73) Goffman cites a paper I wrote for the famous Deviance and Social Control course he offered at UC Berkeley spring semester 1961, the course described in these contributions by Gary Marx and John Lofland, among others. The footnote in question gives me credit for applying to prostitutes his idea that some important stigmas require that individuals possessing them be carefully secret in front of one class of persons, the police, while systematically exposing themselves to another class of persons, in this case potential clients. I took an incomplete in the course and handed in the paper in midsummer. He read it without delay, gave it an A and invited me to his house, something I have learned was not uncommon (the invitation).

Goffman subsequently served as my graduate advisor, in which role he made several observations that have remained with me these many years. When I told him that in considering the above mentioned paper for publication the editors of the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* had wondered whether it was “really” sociology, he said: “They’ll always find a way to put you down.” (Goffman’s Google Scholar citation count as of February 3, 2012, was 58,861 (since 2007?)). When I characterized someone as smart, he said: “All my friends are smart.” (Smarts may be a necessary condition for scholarly achievement, but they are by no means sufficient.) On my down the road career, he cautioned that scholars are judged by the importance, the sum and substance, of their subjects, that I should therefore be done with prostitutes. (I initially turned to delinquents, but eventually recognized the wisdom of his advice and focused on criminals!)

I worked as an RA for Hanan Selvin in the summer of 1961, and was the TA for the required research methods course that covered the 1961-62 school year, co-taught by Selvin and Martin Trow. Selvin was a statistician or mathematician at heart. The report I gave him based on my summer’s work led to a book contract with The Free Press. Thus by the end of my second year in graduate school I was deeply ensconced in what your respondents describe as survey or “variable” research, a world alien to that peopled by

Goffman's students. As a survey researcher, I was not expected to know or to have anything to say about Goffman or his sociology. Goffman, however, called me "the one who got away" (cf. Gary Marx, *supra*), suggesting that I was welcome in his camp and could have stayed had I chosen to do so.

I recall hearing that Goffman and Selvin were friends, which may account for his restrained or even protective treatment of me. Or it may be that he sensed I was incapable of defending myself and concluded that his world-class put-downs would be wasted on such a feeble victim. In any event, I cannot add to the store of anecdotes featuring his terrible swift sword.

I can note that there was never a hint in his conversations with me that my lack of experience in the real world, my failure to act or to participate in the settings I purported to describe, facts easily inferred from my country boy demeanor, disqualified me from pursuit (or understanding) of his line of work. This should come as no surprise. In *Stigma* Goffman may well take into account what he knew about himself, and what he had observed firsthand, but such material found expression, if at all, in his concepts and conclusions. The observations upon which the book is based were provided by an army of participants. The book could not have been written without them.

These individual observers, it should be mentioned, were rarely if ever professional sociologists. They were ordinary people, with lives to live and other things to do. The drop rate in participant observation is so high that it can only rarely pay reasonable dividends when practiced more or less full-time. Even such a gifted observer as Goffman could not make it pay at an advanced stage of his career. Peter Manning tells the story: "Goffman's social interest in blackjack later became a scholarly one: he returned to school to earn certification to become a blackjack dealer, a position he occupied periodically at the Station Plaza Casino in Las Vegas, where he was later promoted to Pit Boss. This experience was intended as research for an anticipated ethnographic project of the social world of the gambler. However, *nothing was ever published*, although his paper 'Where the Action Is' touches upon the topic." Italics added.)

In fact, I recall two words from a well-attended brown bag he gave upon his return from an extended stint in Las Vegas: "evil" and "crisis." Evil expressed his assessment of the gambling enterprise. A crisis was a condition of the social order that justified suspension of one's scholarly efforts. Goffman had seen evil. That was it. There was nothing more to say. A master of detached irony and insight could not go on to document such a conclusion. Goffman had not seen a crisis. He had not found an excuse for manning the barricades rather than doing what scholars do. Here too that was little room for further discussion. Bombs may have been going off in Berkeley, but they were not

Goffman's concern. The situation required that he drop his own bomb (see Gary Marx, elsewhere in this collection).

Thirty-six years after my course with Goffman I closed out my teaching career with PhD and course exam items based on *Stigma*. The PhD exam was leaked from the department to a student outside the specialty area even as it was being administered. Before I had seen the results, I was in possession of a copy of an angry letter to the department chair questioning my (what?) integrity, humanity, competence? The offended student was shocked, shocked, that I dared include homosexuals in a list stigmatized persons. At the same time, a student in my graduate seminar was writing that Goffman's inclusion of women, minorities, and Catholics in his list of blushers ("there is only one complete unblushing male in America...") was a "crock." She later backed off a bit and forgave him for not living long enough to see the end of invidious distinctions.

Someone should bring *Stigma* up to date. If its insights are timeless, which I think they are, if its scheme is akin to Simmel's "pure forms," which I think it is, illustrative materials have multiplied in volume and complexity. It should be replicable. All we lack is a scholar unwilling to be distracted by the current crisis, whatever it might be, a scholar willing to work while others sleep, a scholar deaf to the cries of those who think they deserve to be delisted.

.....

I have noted elsewhere that Goffman's attitude toward what he called "hydraulic" theories reinforced my negative opinion of what I came to call, following Neil Smelser, "strain" theories. The prime example of such a theory at the time was found in Robert Merton's "Social Structure and Anomie." Goffman saved Merton for his final lecture in the course. He had concluded his previous lecture--on the natural groupings of deviants--with a dig at Merton's modes of adaptation to strain: they were an exercise in "journalism." Merton's "cells contain people who have nothing else in common."

Here are my notes from the final lecture.

Sociology 212. May 25(?), 1961.

Merton [provides an opportunity to contrast] disciplined attachment with ways to get kicks....The "Mertonized Man" is realistically future oriented...slowly building it up [through the] routinization of his life, while others are getting "kicks." [He is committed to] slow, gradual accumulation [and] can't risk the whole thing on a piece of information. [He therefore] down-plays expressive status symbols (clothes) [and feels that] problematic events have to be kept

out of the daily round. [He realizes that] mating, business contacts, sports, and domestic sex have non-methodical aspects, [that they involve] testing, movement away from routinization, putting each other down, crevices in the edifice of middle-class routine. The middle-class job is uneventful.

“Messy situations” are the middle class way of saying that the process of accumulation has been interrupted.

The “steady bloke” accumulates within a normative framework. He doesn’t assess the cost of going by the rules. “Principles” are involved. You can’t have a principle that does not involve you in some loss at some time. A terrible price must be paid for normative involvement—at least at times. Principles interfere with accumulation – high principles have high costs.

[So much for Merton’s man.]

Some groups in our society have been or are de-Mertonized. Military officers (circa 1900) could be required to fight duels with members of the larger society. Their careers could be interrupted at any time. We [middle class] have small accumulations per day—there is nothing especially risky on any one day. Lower class “impulse life” is opposite to middle class life which “kills the moment.”

Examples are found in the “romantic trades,” in the performance arts, where everything can be lost in a moment. Boxers (zero sum), actors, graphic work. A ship’s captain: every time he brings it in [he exposes himself to] a visible demonstration of his skills. The fisherman doesn’t know how many fish he’s going to pull out. [These are occupations in which] you’re in a position to make a mistake.

Female “Belle of the Ball” reaches and passes her zenith in a moment. The sociable round of timeless groups, beats, corner boys, beach combers, et al. They have nothing to look forward to, nor back on.

Addicts seldom, if ever, get a store that will last more than a day. It may not be the drug as much as “the game” of getting it. Each day an achievement. Each day the chase can be resumed. Each day has to be planned.

Homosexuals have one-night stands, nightly courtship, something happening every day. The values of the group can be consummated during social occasions.

Engineering of expressive tests. Jazz, parties, cars, motorcycles, bull fighting, “moments of truth.” There are no moments of truth in routinized, honest life.

Arrangements for tests of the norms are difficult in middle class. "Sounding" in delinquent gangs [are] interpersonal events [that] can lead to instant violent action.

Risk level. Criminals often think "sneaky" work doesn't involve enough risk or pressure. [They prefer crimes that] show that you're strong, fearless, sexually attractive.

Part of the attraction of socially deviant groups is that you can justify the fact that you don't have a future by the simple fact that you have a present.

[So much for being forced into deviant behavior by thwarted efforts to achieve the American Dream!]