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## Goffman Was by Far the Smartest, Most Interesting, Complex, Though, at Times, Snide or Disparaging Individual I Have Ever Known

John Irwin  
*San Francisco State University*

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

**John Irwin:**

**Goffman Was by Far the Smartest, Most Interesting, Complex, Though, at Times, Snide or Disparaging Individual I Have Ever Known**

Dr. John Irwin, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the San Francisco State University, gave his approval for posting this memoir in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 08-07-08]

August 12, 2007

My wife forwarded your email to me and I have taken the passages about Erving from my unpublished autobiography.

**John Irwin**

I became close friends with two Berkeley professors – Erving Goffman and David Matza. When I met Goffman he had recently published his penetrating, disturbing and highly successful books *Asylums*, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and *Stigma* – in which he characterized social behavior as self-conscious performances. He was by far the smartest, most interesting, complex, though, at times, snide or disparaging individual I have ever known. To understand him, you have to know his origins. He was raised in a small town in central Manitoba, way up in the Canadian sticks. His family, who owned the town's drug store, was one of the very few Jewish families in town. In school, on top of being an outcast Jew among the children of WASP plains folks, Erving was very short. In high school, he threw a sink bomb in the school auditorium during an assembly. But he was probably the smartest kid in the province. Needless to say, he was an outsider and remained so, more or less, all of his life, which ended too soon (he died of cancer at 59, another fateful blow). With unparalleled perspicacity, he observed and dissected all social groups and settings – friendships, marriages, work settings, public social settings, and society in general – always from his outsider position. But because of the disadvantages he inherited – being a short Jew in worlds dominated by tall “goyem” – he was pissed off and this shaded all of his perceptions and analysis. In his study of stigma in everyday life, he proceeded from the assumption that, to the extent that persons depart from the cultural ideal of the tall, blond haired, blue-eyed handsome or beautiful individual, they are stigmatized and must apologize and make adjustments. The fact that his first wife jumped off the Richmond San Rafael Bridge is revealing. It was amazing we became friends. When I first got to Berkeley, he invited me out to the Bear's Lair, the student on-campus restaurant, for a talk. He knew of me through the article I had written with Don Cressey, which he had reviewed before its publication. He wanted to know more about me. I gave him the outline of my life and he commented that it was too bad that I was not a black, homosexual ex-convict so that I would have all the major stigmas to work from. That was typical of his style of interaction. I went

on and took his seminars and joined the ranks of "his" students. At the end of my first year, he encouraged me to go back to L.A. and study surfers for my master's thesis, which I did with glee. What could be better – hanging around the beaches, surfing and talking to one of my favorite groups. I completed my thesis the next year, gave it to him, and he passed it but did not like it. It was a damn good paper, much of which I published later, but it was from a phenomenological viewpoint, which he did not particularly care for. He coldly informed me that he would not work with me on a PhD. To my good fortune, he passed me to David Matza, another emerging star in the field. I didn't have much contact with Goffman for the next two years. When I put together a group of professors to serve as my orals' committee, which had to pass on my mastery of several chosen areas of sociology before I could go on to my last task, the dissertation, I purposely left him off because I heard he gave one of the other graduate students I knew a lot of trouble during his orals. I ran into Goffman just before he was to leave Berkeley for the University of Pennsylvania. He told me he was leaving because he wanted to get his teenage son out of Berkeley . I believe he also left because did not like the Berkeley graduate students' heavy involvement in the political activities – the free speech movement and the Viet Nam war protests – that were centered at Berkeley – and the fact that mediocre sociologists like Neil Smelser, and not him, got most of the rewards that the University distributed. We had one of our best talks. He was disappointed that he had not been on my orals, but seemed to be approving of my progress at Berkeley and we parted on a good note.

In the next few years, after I had completed my dissertation and it was published and received very well in the field, I visited him at his home whenever I was in Philadelphia , which was frequent because I was working with the American Friends Service Committee headquartered there. I had passed his test, published a good book, and we then developed a friendship that lasted until he died. During that period I married Marsha Rosenbaum, whom he developed a deep fondness for, and the three of us spent many times together, particularly skiing, a sport he loved. It was riding up ski lifts together, sometimes in freezing blizzards, that I got to know him best.

I am absolutely certain that the series of books that Erving produced, which are crammed full of profound sociological analysis, will stand as the most important body of sociology produced in the 60s and 70s. No one can read them without being greatly informed and disturbed about themselves, others and social behavior in general. But this is not what my wife and I, and many of his friends will remember him for most. We remember him for his penetrating, sometimes brutal insights and wit. Erving could see things, sum them up and characterize them with a rapier verbal thrust that simultaneously cracked you up and struck you down. For example, on the second day of one of the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, arriving appropriately late, which was his custom, he hurriedly entered the lobby of the hotel housing the meetings. He passed the first little clump of sociologists, who had their name tags pinned on their coats and were talking to each other while they looked over each others' shoulders, surveying who was around or passing by, which is the main activity at these meetings. They spotted Erving whom all knew by sight and by whom all would like to be known. He said as he passed them, "Hi, if I can't find anybody more important than you guys to talk to I'll be right back." He walked into the house of Jackie Wiseman, a middle-aged graduate student, who had returned to school after working for 15 or so years as a social worker, was as nice, square, and middle-class as anyone could

be, and was one of Erving's students of whom he was very fond and supportive. Still, he looked around for a few moments and said, "Jackie, you have managed to pull together the crassest, dowdiest collection of furniture and decorations I have ever seen." Though he was very kind to my wife, he loved to try to level me. Knowing my background and the difference in my and Marsha's age (19 years), he asked her in a disapproving tone, why she had married me. She told him that when she informed her mother, to whom she had finally revealed all my negative aspects – divorced, two kids, not Jewish and an ex-convict, which were hardly balanced by my being a professor – that we were thinking about "moving in together" (which in fact we had already done), her mother declared, "Marry him, but for god sakes don't 'shack up' with him!" He retorted, "Good lord, she should have said, 'Shack up with him, but for god sakes don't marry him!'" One evening we were driving from San Francisco toward the cabin we had shared for the winter with some other skiers. Erving was seated in the folding chair we placed between the two front seats of our van. He shuffled through the little box of our audio-cassettes we had recorded to be played on the van's tape deck. In the box were a collection of pop music, mostly Marsha's favorites, and classical music, mostly my favorites. After scrutinizing them for a few minutes he said "I don't know which is worst, Marsha's high brow, low brow music, or John's low brow, high brow music."

Even though Erving could be a pain in the ass and sometimes cruel, my wife and I loved him because he was so smart, fascinating, entertaining, and occasionally kind. He brightened up our lives. One of the highlights of our years during the 70s and early 80s was the annual ASA meeting when we got together with Erving, as well as several other of our sociologist friends who were spread out across the country. At these professional meetings, you are thrown into a sea of other sociologists whom you don't know, know slightly, know well, want to know, don't want to know, or find out after a few minutes of chitchat you never want to know. It is an invidious scene and can be tiring, boring and stressful. But with Erving, it was always interesting and fun. The year he died, Erving was serving as the President of the Association, and he had enlisted Marsha to plan and host his out-going party at the annual meeting. A week before the meeting, we received a phone call informing us that he was not going to be able to attend because it had been discovered he had stomach cancer. I phoned his home and was surprised when he answered the phone. I guess I had thought that he would have been being cared for and someone else would answer the phone. I got some question like "How are you?" out of my mouth and he answered me in a matter of fact manner that his cancer was inoperable and he was dying. I cannot remember what he or I said next. He died a few weeks later. I have never attended another ASA annual meeting.

**[End of the recording]**