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## In Writing These Reflections, I Realize I Should Re-read Goffman for New Insights on Contemporary Conflict Resolution Issues

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## Remembering Erving Goffman

### **Louis Kriesberg: In Writing These Reflections, I Realize I Should Re-read Goffman for New Insights on Contemporary Conflict Resolution Issues**

Dr. Louis Kriesberg, Maxwell Professor Emeritus of Social Conflict Studies at Syracuse University, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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The sociology graduate students at the University of Chicago, in the decade after the end of the Second World War, were a large and diverse community. We ranged from young college graduates to older cohorts, including many veterans with and without pre-war graduate study experience. I, like several others taking graduate courses, were recent graduates of the University of Chicago College; in those years the 4-yr College began after 2 years of high school and was normally completed in the second year of a conventional college. After completing the U of C College, or even earlier when a student has "placed out" of any required College level course, graduate work in the Divisions could begin. So, I began taking graduate courses in 1946, receiving my Ph.B. in 1947.

Erving Goffman was among the somewhat older graduate students, and was well regarded among the students in that immediate post-war cohort. My earliest specific recollection of him was a lunch we had upon his return from the Shetland Islands in 1950. I recall his enthusiastic talk about his experiences there – the beauty of the place and the earthiness and warmth of the people. His excitement was wonderful to see.

We overlapped at Chicago until 1953, when we both received our Ph.D., and I left to teach at Columbia University. I saw him at various social get-togethers in Chicago, but was not a close associate. And I met him once or twice in Washington when he was working at NIMH. I recall him holding forth in a gathering about the importance of not using psychological terms, but rather creating terms that conveyed a sociological meaning and context. This was in response to some questioning of his tendency to produce and use new words.

I read his work with great pleasure, but given my own interest in relatively macro issues, and particularly ways to advance peace and avoid wars, did not see much relevance of his work for what I was doing. I heartily enjoyed what he wrote and recall sharing some articles with my brother, Irving, a fine-arts

painter. My brother was enthusiastic about Goffman's writing, encouraging me to write like that rather than continue with my mundane empirical style.

I had the usual encounters with Erving that many others experienced. For example, once at an ASA meeting, when I was standing around talking with a couple of colleagues, Erving was walking by, and I greeted him. He came over, lifted up my tie (which was worn back then) looked at it and said, "That's a lousy-looking tie," and walked on. That was so out of line, I couldn't take umbrage – he had created a memorable event, and demonstrated the importance of social conventions by violating one of them. Perhaps he was also drawing attention to his own personage and perhaps also suggesting a camaraderie that could withstand the social disruption he had created. Whatever, it did induce reflection on social interactions.

I remember that when Goffman was elected president of the ASA, some of us who knew him wondered how dutiful he would be in filling that position. By all accounts he took the role seriously, worked hard and effectively and performed it excellently.

Over the later years, I found that in my thinking I was using some of the formulations and insights that Goffman had introduced and elaborated. They were congenial because they drew on work of professors we had shared as students, and because they applied so well to the everyday experience of my and everyone's lives. More pertinently, they were useful in thinking about conflict waging and resolving, which concerned me. I was helped in seeing relevant connections by some of my graduate students. Many of them were reading Goffman and applying his thinking to many different arenas of study.

The idea of framing and re-framing is central to contemporary conflict resolution. Conflicts viewed as confrontations between enemies can come to be viewed as a problem that needs to be solved by them. Adversaries can turn from facing each in other in confrontations to facing a common problem side by side. Much conflict resolution analysis and practice focuses how such transforming re-framing comes about.

His ideas about performance, presentation of self, and of back-stage and front stage can be useful in thinking about and understanding negotiations. Representatives of opposing sides must speak to multiple audiences and use props to help them do so. His work pertains to saving face and managing threats of shame or humiliation, which can have relevance for the growing conflict resolution work on recovery from destructive conflict, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in general.

In writing these reflections, I realize I should re-read Goffman for new insights on contemporary conflict resolution issues. So, Erving Goffman, instead of fading away in hazy recollections of a long-gone past, emerges as a contemporary colleague, suggesting new answers to old questions and at the same time challenging me to think freshly and creatively.

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