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A Glimpse of Goffman

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Lester R. Kurtz: A Glimpse of Goffman

Dr. Lester R. Kurtz, Professor of George Mason University, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 02-09-11]

In the 1970s, when the ASA meetings were in Chicago, the University of Chicago sociology department held a dinner at the Faculty Club for alumni. Graduate students were invited to attend, but the cost was rather steep, as I mentioned to someone in the office (not at the time understanding the importance of such networking opportunities). I later received a call asking if I would like to sell tickets for the bar in exchange for a free meal and I gladly accepted.

While selling tickets, I ran out of change and told one alum that I would pay him back as soon as I got some more small bills. He came up behind me on my right side once or twice and leaned over asking politely if I'd gotten change for him yet.

Suddenly someone else came up to the same spot, leaned over, and said harshly, "Where's my change?! Give me my change, you bastard!!" Before I could even turn to see who it was, Morris Janowitz stepped up, "Come on now, Erv, don't give him such a hard time."

The mystery harasser was, of course, Erving Goffman.

The following year, I was walking with Jeff Goldfarb across a hotel lobby at the ASA meetings when I spotted him sitting and talking with a couple of people on chairs along the wall. When I noticed that he was not wearing a convention name badge, I approached him and harshly admonished him, "You don't belong here – you don't have a badge!"

He seemed to recognize me, gave a flash of a grin, then replied in the same tone, "You don't have the authority to tell me what to do!" and continued talking with his colleagues.

That was my brush with the genius's playful presentation of self.