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Victor Lidz
Hahnemann University

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Victor Lidz:

I found Goffman Talented, Original, Rewarding to Read, but Basically Problematic

Dr. Victor Lidz, Professor of Sociology at the Hahnemann University, wrote this memoir at the invitation of Dmitri Shalin and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 12-01-08]

December 1, 2008

Dear Professor Shalin,

Thank you for sending me the links to your e-library on Goffman. I have read through your interview with Eviatar Zerubavel, which I enjoyed very much. It certainly captures the flavor of the Goffman I knew, although I can't say that I knew him well. Let me respond in two ways. First I will add a few notes to the Zerubavel story. Then I will describe the very brief history of my relationship to Goffman.

On the Zerubavel story: I think that my contribution to Zerubavel's truly creative sociology of time was simply this: After taking a graduate seminar on sociological theory with Harold Bershady and myself, and perhaps it was after Eviatar and Yael had taken my seminar on Weber as well, but possibly before that, Eviatar sat in on the undergraduate course I taught on classical sociological theory, saying that he wanted to do so to prepare for his comprehensive exam. When I was teaching Durkheim's *Elementary Forms*, I emphasized the importance of collective categories to the coordination of social relationships and institutions with illustrations relating to time: concepts of hour, minute, day, week, year, etc. and of the calendar generally. I noted that the class could meet at its appointed times and we all had no difficulty in knowing **when** we should show up for class and how long it should last. Shortly thereafter, Eviatar came to my office saying that he had the conceptual focus for his study. Later, as he explains, through discussion with the committee and Renee Fox's connection to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, he was able to conduct the research for his landmark study. I knew that he was having difficulty with Goffman in the planning, carrying out, and reporting of his research. As I heard it, Goffman insisted that the only way to study the hospital was to conduct a general ethnography of it, a point Eviatar's account does not make directly. Only then could one come to some focus on time. Eviatar had to insist that an ethnography could be conducted under the abstraction of concepts of time and their importance to coordinating schedules in the hospital. He certainly laid out the complexity of the scheduling and the moral-normative importance of adhering to schedules in the life-and-death setting of a general, tertiary care hospital. However, I did not know of the long history of the ways in which Goffman "played" with Eviatar leading up to the proposal for the research as well as in the reception of it after it was completed. I was told, I think by Renee Fox, that he had grudgingly acknowledged that Eviatar had

proved correct about the possibility of an ethnographic study guided by abstracting the dimension of time from the observed social relationships, but perhaps that was an exaggeration. I was kept off of almost all comprehensive committees and dissertation committees that might involve controversies – I think at Renee Fox's behest, as she seemed to believe that I would get into even further trouble with such people as Rieff and Goffman – Rieff especially, as he was doing his best to get rid of me from the department. To the best of my memory, I was not part of Eviatar's comprehensive committee for that reason. I certainly have no memory of being at any such academic exercise with Goffman.

On Goffman and myself: Before I arrived in the department in 1973, I had been at the University of Chicago for five years. During that time, two people were candidates for positions at Chicago who presented themselves as Goffman's students. One was Barry Schwartz, the other Sam Heilman. Both made favorable impressions with everyone who cared about qualitative research at Chicago, but Barry's candidacy was debated at length and Sam's was eventually rejected for the same reason: they were students of Goffman and people in the department at Chicago regarded him as a sort of amateur sociologist, not a solid one, and hence anyone who had worked closely with him was suspect.

My initial view of Goffman was based on *Presentation of Self, Stigma, Behavior in Public Places*, and *Asylums* (which my psychiatrist father called, too simply but with a point, the book that argued that only psychiatric hospitals made people crazy). The difficulty I had with all of these works was that they seemed un-Durkheimian – they viewed normative order as what people manipulate in order to gain advantage from others, not as what binds and regulates one's interaction with others. So, I viewed Goffman as talented, original, rewarding to read, but problematic in basic ways. That was the view that I brought to Penn.

Still, I was interested to meet him. After the first faculty meeting that I attended, I asked Harold Bershadsky why he hadn't been there. Harold said, he was there, even though he did not usually attend meetings. Harold said, "Didn't you see the guy dressed like a cab driver? (I hadn't.) That was Goffman." For the next couple of years, I don't recall meeting Goffman or having any conversation with him. He came to department meetings only two more times, I believe, in those years, both times when Renee Fox as department chair specifically asked him to come to participate in important decisions, such as, bringing Elijah Anderson to the department.

When a need to revise the department's introductory course for undergraduates arose a couple of years later, I proposed, and colleagues agreed, that we should read some of Goffman's work in the second semester – the Microsociology semester – and so we taught *Behavior in Public Places*. For a couple of years we read it just before giving students an assignment to go out and observe some setting and write a paper on what they found. It proved a disaster in that role, precisely, I think, for its un-Durkheimian perspective. With it as a guide, students couldn't see any serious relationships in what they observed. They reported mostly on the manipulative behavior of rather isolated, socially unengaged individuals. To make the assignment work, we had to separate it from the reading in Goffman and insist that they conduct

their small studies on people in their occupation roles. Then we got many wonderful papers!

When Goffman published *Frame Analysis*, I read it with great enthusiasm. It seemed to me to contribute importantly to the problem of how normative orders in a Durkheimian-Parsonian sense get transformed so that they provide guidance for interaction in specific situations. It helped understand the normative complexity of situations in which norms relating to different areas of the overall normative order may simultaneously regulate interaction, such as, when one has dinner with a scientific colleague with whom one disagrees and must act both as critical scientist and as polite dinner companion at the same time. Bershady and I began to teach *Frame Analysis* in both the undergraduate and graduate courses on contemporary theory. At that time, I hoped, naively, I guess, to have useful collegial discussions with Goffman. Bershady had something of a friendship with him. The other people whom I knew were friendly with him were Frank Furstenburg, who was not interested in the sort of issues I wanted to discuss, and Rieff, who would do nothing helpful for me. So I asked Bershady if we could set up an occasion when the two of us could meet with Goffman and start a conversation. So Harold set up a lunch. We met at Goffman's house, which impressed me greatly for its aesthetics as well as the number of books on the shelves. Then we went to a local Deli that Goffman favored and Harold knew. The discussion was a disaster. Goffman made clear that as a Parsonian I was the enemy of the Chicago School with which he identified. (I thought that ironic given the opinion of him I had found at Chicago, although I admit there were no true Chicago School adherents there at the time, Jerry Suttles being the closest, but beneath the surface having a different perspective on the analysis of social relationships, at least back then.) I was an East Coast functionalist, the school that had displaced Chicago from leadership in the profession. He would not cooperate with any such person, even when I tried to put forward ideas that bridged the schools. I should add that Goffman expressed his views in a joking, playful manner, but it was all a way of putting off any serious discussion. He did, however, speak of his profound respect for Durkheim and particularly *The Elementary Forms*. That impressed me, even though there was no opportunity to discuss how he saw his own works as Durkheimian, a topic that would have interested me.

A year or so later, I asked Harold to try again. That time, we met at the same Deli. Goffman cut the conversation much shorter, saying that he had to leave for an appointment. The discussion did not proceed even as far as the previous lunch. I think that when he saw that our purpose remained what it had been earlier, Goffman simply decided to bail out as quickly as he could. The conversation was again on the surface polite and humorous, but he was literally off-putting to any intellectual exchange. That was the last occasion we had any exchange.

I gathered, despite the supposed confidentiality of such proceedings, that he played a role, at Rieff's instigation, in opposing my candidacy for tenure at Penn. I think that my advocates in the department, e.g., Renee Fox and Harold Bershady, hoped that with his disinterest in the Sociology Department, they could keep him out of the process. But I gather Rieff mobilized him by noting the possibility of getting rid of a Harvard functionalist. I think it showed that when he was engaged with the

department's business, he had integrity to his own views.

That is pretty much the whole story.

I think your e-library is wonderful. I think that sort of professional biography is well worth doing. I look forward to reading the other people's comments on their relations to Goffman. And I look forward to reading the two papers you sent. I started both and look forward to finishing them at home this evening.

You are welcome to post any or all or none of the above as you find helpful to your project.

With best wishes,

Victor Lidz