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Goffman Demonstrated the Best Teaching Skills of Any Professor I Had Ever Had!

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Jane Emery Prather: Goffman Demonstrated the Best Teaching Skills of Any Professor I Had Ever Had!

Dr. Jane Prather, Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave her permission to post it in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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My first encounter with Mr. Goffman (we referred to our professors as *Mister* at UCB) was in Fall 1964 when I enrolled in his graduate course on social interaction. I was extremely excited about taking his course since I was familiar with both *ENCOUNTERS and PRESENTATION OF SELF IN EVERYDAY LIFE*, having studied them at the University of Kansas, where I obtained both my BA and MA degrees. The course focused on his latest book, *BEHAVIOR IN PUBLIC PLACES*, which I found fascinating and [which] corresponded to many of my own observations. In that time period of the 1960s, I thought Goffman demonstrated the best teaching skills of any professor I had ever heard! (Most professors of that era literally lectured – some, of course, better than others. Incidentally, Neil Smelser was the only professor who wrote an outline of his presentation on the blackboard so the students could follow his arguments.) Goffman came to class rolling a large opaque projector into the room so he could illustrate his concepts with photos, advertisements, or drawings. He always seemed prepared with the multitude of pictures in order. I loved the variety of sources – mass media photos (from *Life* magazine) or advertisements or old cartoons. He was never limited to academic sources. I remember when he talked about norms of public places and produced Rules of Conduct documents from churches, prisons, corporations, and the military, etc. I was truly enthralled. For our major paper, we were to focus on a public place and “hang around” observing the minute norms of social order. I chose behavior in an art museum – I guess because I loved art museums I thought I’d hang around a place that I found interesting. In any case, I receive

an A – and some great comments. I was very pleased. Another student (I won't reveal his name) later asked if he could read my paper because Goffman said I had done a better job on mine than he had. We had both conducted observations about art museums and this fellow student was upset about his grade of B++. My final grade in the class: A.

My next class was a seminar in fall of '66 or spring '67, which was much smaller – maybe 10-12 students. But, again the same format. As I recall Goffman was working on his ideas of facework and looking at gambling as a way to illustrate control of emotions in the face. I began to know Goffman a little better but I never thought he really showed any great interest in my work. However, at one point, I went to see him, probably in the Spring of 1967, after I had had a baby girl in February of that year. When Goffman met me in his office he said, "Why don't you just go home – raise your child and forget about graduate school?" I was really furious! (Remember this is still an era of women remaining at home after having a child). I said, "I can't!! I really want to do this." Then Goffman seemed reassured and said, "Okay, you can be like the British and just get a nanny." Having said that, Goffman never mentioned this topic again, and we went on to discuss his being on my orals committee.

As others have mentioned, Goffman at this time was a very dapper dresser! He often wore a bow tie with a V-neck sweater or sport coat. He was definitely small and I felt I towered over him. So, he was probably 5'4" (I'm 5'6"). I had the impression, as I thought about his anti-social reputation, that being short he had learned to confront "bullies" as a teenager by noting when to break etiquette rules and verbally attack bigger guys. I never felt at ease with him or knew where I stood with him, because he didn't verbalize supportive comments. And there were lots of graduate student rumors and stories about his behavior. Nevertheless, I was enthralled with his work and his classes and determined to study further with him.

Goffman agreed to be on my orals committee in the area of social interaction. Other members: Smelser for Collective Behavior,

Blumer for theory, Clausen for Socialization, and an anthropologist for my outside person. Only in thinking about this commentary, did I realize how Goffman came to my rescue during the orals. Near the end of the orals, I was becoming flustered about some theory question and I was nervously grappling for an answer. Sensing my difficulties, Goffman suggested we all take a tea break. At which point, we left the room and went to the department office and all had a cup of tea before concluding. This proved to be a lifesaving moment! When we returned I completed the orals and passed provisionally – with the stipulation that I write a paper on the theory issue and discuss it with Smelser. I am now convinced that Goffman's keen observations led him to come to my rescue.

Goffman was very instrumental in helping me define a dissertation topic. I had only vague ideas of what I wanted to study, I only knew I want to do a participant observation study of a public place. Since he was interested in gambling as a way to study strategic interaction, he became intrigued in how various people in different roles react to handling money. Banks had just begun the practice of having hidden cameras and Goffman was fascinated about what the photos revealed about behavior in banks. He introduced me to Paul Ekman at the UCSF neuropsychiatric institute who was and is the expert on non-verbal behavior and Goffman put me in contact with senior officers at the Bank of California. Together, we worked out the dissertation topic – "Observations of customer-teller interactions concerning money." I wanted to just observe tellers but Goffman insisted that I needed to actually work as a bank teller, to be a true participant-observer. Although I did not want to do this, my 6 months of working in disguise as a bank teller provided the most valuable data for my dissertation. (Later, I observed tellers and loan officers in three other bank branches that differed by social class.)

Although Goffman left UC Berkeley to go to Pennsylvania, he agreed to remain on my dissertation committee, but not as chair. He helped me discuss my plans with David Matza, who served as chair, and Paul Ekman as the third committee member. I was very free to work out my schedule and my ideas. When I sent chapters to

Goffman he responded with excellent but brief feedback while the other two members allowed Goffman to be the major contributor.

There were two other encounters I had with Goffman. Just before he left Berkeley, we were discussing my plans when I commented I really liked to teach and would like to be in an academic [environment] focusing on teaching. He looked very disgusted, saying, "Then, why are you here?" I told him I wanted the best Sociology background and one needed a doctorate to teach in any good university. I realized I had disappointed him – he wanted students who would contribute the most to research, including his own.

As I stated previously, Goffman was not one to offer reassurances to students or directly express support. Even though he did write excellent reference letters for me, he could never face-to-face offer any positive support. The last time I saw Goffman was at ASA in San Francisco in the early 1970s. He was on the escalator and I was reluctant to go up to him since I felt like I was a disappointment to him. Noticing my reticence, a colleague pushed me forward. Goffman looked up. His only comment, "I wished you had sent me photos of your work in the bank. I could have used them."