

12-12-2013

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Repository Citation

Short, J. F. (2013). Erving Seemed Surprised at How Little “Power” Came with the ASA Presidency, and Noted that the Position of Secretary Carried Much More Clout. In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-4.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/63

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Remembering Erving Goffman

James F. Short

**Erving Seemed Surprised at How Little “Power” Came with the ASA Presidency,
and Noted that the Position of Secretary Carried Much More Clout**

Dr. James F. Short, Professor Emeritus at the Washington State University, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post it in the Erving Goffman Archives.

[Posted 12-12-13]

Chicago was a deeply divided department during my graduate school years, 1947-51. In response to a flood of applications from returning service men and women (including me) they had expanded the cohort of entering graduate students. The decision apparently had only recently been made. Initially my application was denied, which led me to travel from Denison, my BA institution, to Chicago to plead my case. The only member of the department with whom I spoke was Louis Wirth. I have no idea what I may have said or done to change departmental minds, but shortly thereafter I was accepted.

Devotees of major professors formed their own groupings. Andy Henry and I quickly bonded and I came to know others who were interested in social change, crime, deviant behavior, and race. Because all entering graduate students at the time took Wirth's theory course and a general methodology course there was a good deal of interaction and we got to know each other. But no EG, who may have been off in Scotland during my last year. Subsequent to graduate school I got acquainted with many of the symbolic interactionists and with Blumer; and became friends with a few of them (Peter Manning, Arlene Daniels, Jackie Weisman), as well as with Everett and Helen Hughes and Everett's best, and most special, student, Howie Becker.

A great deal more could be said about divisions within the Chicago department during my graduate student years. There seemed to be a sort of willful disinterest in each other's students. When Wirth attended my oral dissertation proposal hearing he asked if I planned to interview any of the criminals who contributed to the statistics of crime I was studying. Following my negative reply he proceeded to open and read his mail! After the hearing Ogburn assured me of his support, something he had never done before. I think Howie Becker had a similar experience in reverse; i.e., in his final oral dissertation defense Ogburn asked why he had no tables. Everett Hughes assured him that tables would be added. In my own final defense Dudley Duncan, who had only recently come back to the department, challenged some point, and Ogburn bolstered my defense. Unlike the two previous cases, there was no malice in Dudley's question. I am certain that Ogburn was a prime mover in bringing Dudley into the department. Nor do I believe that malice motivated the other cases. It's just that divisions in the department were strong. Old timers such as Ogburn, Wirth, and Blumer were well entrenched and soon to retire (Ogburn), leave the U of C (Blumer) or die (Wirth). Burgess, of course, retired in 1951. Everett left for Brandeis shortly after I returned to the department in 1959. I regretted that Everett was absent when I completed my master's thesis because I liked and respected him so much. My post-PhD contacts with all of the faculty members were very positive in a variety of contexts.

Although I have read much of his published work, I did not know Erving well. We overlapped a bit in graduate school but our paths never crossed until well after. I recall meeting Saul Mendlovitz very early in graduate school and being surprised that he seemed to know precisely why he was there; viz., to study with Blumer. At the time I had little idea what I wanted to study or with whom. As it turned out, I studied primarily with Ogburn and Clifford Shaw. I doubt that Saul or Erving ever took a course from either. In the course of a long career, I became friends with many of Erving's students, including all of the members of the EGA advisory board. I know most of the people cited in your paper, like and respect them all.

I recall being surprised by reports of Erving's legendary behavior in interpersonal and situational contexts, but I never experienced them. On one of our few face-to-face interactions, probably at that 1980 ASA meeting in New York, we shared a cab on the way to Betty Freidan's apartment. Betty was away and Leni Weitzman had the key to her apartment (she may have been living there at the time). In any case, Erving and I, and others, were invited to a party at Freidan's place. Erving's and my conversation largely concerned the ASA. I believe he had only recently been elected ASA president. Our conversation was brief and cordial. He seemed surprised at how little "power" came with the ASA presidency, and noted that the position of Secretary carried much more clout. Having recently served in that capacity, I told him that I had never thought of the position in power terms, but that it was a lot of work! That was about it. Erving's untimely death robbed us all of a fine scholar.

To the best of my knowledge, Erving was never very active in ASA, yet he was elected president of the organization. Much the same could be said of Jim Coleman and Bill Wilson. All three may have refused to stand for election before relenting and being elected. I am quite sure that was true of Coleman and Wilson. I suspect that Jim chose not to run earlier because he felt he had more important work to do. Joe Himes told me that Bill had turned down the nomination because he felt he did not yet deserve such recognition. All three certainly were deserving, a mark of their stature, independent of service within the organization.

One further comment. Alice [Erving's daughter] is a fine ethnographer in her own right. I met her at an urban ethnography conference at Penn. She gave an excellent paper on her dissertation research, an ethnographic study of a group of drug dealers, which was the basis for her dissertation and a later book and an article in *AJS*. More recently she was featured in a major piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Does the EGA contain anything on Alice?

I enjoyed your introductory article in the special issue of Symbolic Interaction.

Best wishes for the holiday season and the New Year,

-Jim Short