

8-30-2010

Dmitri Shalin Interview with Arlene Skolnick about Erving Goffman entitled "Remembering Erving Goffman"

Arlene Skolnick

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives



Part of the [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Skolnick, A. (2010). Dmitri Shalin Interview with Arlene Skolnick about Erving Goffman entitled "Remembering Erving Goffman". In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-13. Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/64

This Interview is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Scholarship@UNLV with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Interview in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Interview has been accepted for inclusion in Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives by an authorized administrator of Digital Scholarship@UNLV. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@unlv.edu.

Remembering Erving Goffman

Arlene Skolnick

These conversations with Dr. Arlene Skolnick were recorded over the phone on August 7 and August 30, 2010. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the conversations, Dr. Skolnick edited the transcript and approved posting the present version in the Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information and additional materials inserted during the editing process appear in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as "[?]".

Arlene Skolnick: Hello.

Shalin: Hello, how are you?

Skolnick: OK, Jerry told me about your web site and I looked at it and it was fascinating. I knew many people on it.

Shalin: Oh, thank you! Every time I find someone digging the stuff we are collecting, I feel happy.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, yes, and it really captures Erving, as I remember him. When we were in Berkeley, we had many many occasions with him. I never made a connection with him as a person. He was always on, always had this joking exterior. I read this piece by Arlene Daniels, whom I know, and I was very impressed with the way she was able to take him on and banter with him. I couldn't think of any comeback fast enough. I was always startled by what he said.

Shalin: Do you remember your first encounter with Erving?

Arlene Skolnick: Well, Jerry was at the sociology department, and we were newcomers, and it was at faculty events. I don't remember many conversations with him. I remember Chinese dinners, dinner parties, larger parties, but he was never more than an acquaintance, a distant acquaintance who occasionally would issue some barbed, double-edged statement.

Shalin: Any particular occasion comes to mind when Erving was on?

Arlene Skolnick: I remember Reinhard Bendix saying to someone else, I think it was Selznick, "Is Goffman ever not on, is he ever off?" And nobody could think of any time when he was not on, when he would lay down that exterior. That might be an apocryphal memory, but I do remember Bendix saying something like that. He was on a long train ride or plane ride with Erving, and Erving was on all the time.

Shalin: Sort of commenting, observing.

Arlene Skolnick: You know what the expression "[being] on" means?

Shalin: Sure.

Arlene Skolnick: Like being on stage, giving a performance.

Shalin: Presenting himself.

Arlene Skolnick: Presenting himself, yes, Jerry says [**laughing**]. There was this persona he was always enacting.

Shalin: What sort of self-image did he try to communicate to others?

Arlene Skolnick: He was always playing social games in a funny kind of ways. Something popped into my head, [it was like] "Curb your enthusiasm." But Larry David was sincerely violating social rules, showing what happens. Erving was always doing it purposefully to throw people off.

. . .

Shalin: I am interested in the fate of spouses whose husbands taught at Berkeley. Some of these spouses – Gertrude Selznick, Schuyler Goffman, and perhaps yourself – were scholars in their own right but the opportunities to teach and do research were limited at the time. My question to you is how prevalent this

situation was in the 1960s, and what would faculty wives, especially those with a higher education and Ph.D.'s, would do under the circumstances?

Arlene Skolnick: That's right. Well, I always worked. I always had a job at the university as a researcher at the Institute of Human Development. So I was always on soft money and only as staff. I had a professional identity. There was a sort of faculty wife niche. I think there was something like the faculty wife club or a set of clubs organized according to various interests, but I was never part of that. I had some occasions to do things with that group of people, but not really.

Shalin: Was it a purely social affair?

Arlene Skolnick: More or less, yes. There were some charity activities, book clubs, things like that. Jerry was affiliated with the law school for most of the time we were there. That had a really organized women group of all of the faculty wives. I always had a sort of ambiguous status because Jerry was not the law-law faculty – he was in sociology of law. A lot of these women were older, more of the post-war, '50s wives. And they had strong organizations, always organizing an annual dinner, picnics, things like that. So there was this niche, and then it faded, I believe, as women faculty came to the campus. This was a transitional period when there were few women faculty. Then feminist groups sprang up.

Shalin: When did feminist groups gain a foothold on campus?

Arlene Skolnick: Well, let's see. I can't speak for the whole campus, but in sociology there was a group that started in the early '70s. Lenore Weitzman – do you know who she is?

Shalin: Yes, I do.

Arlene Skolnick: She was at Davis and she was at Stanford. She and William J. Goode came out here. They were at Stanford. She started groups that continued into the '90s, although she was long gone. The personnel changed. Gertrude (Selznick) was in the early

group and Nancy Chodorow. I can't think of other names, but a lot of women whose names you would recognize were in it.

Shalin: Was Arlie Hochschild part of that group?

Arlene Skolnick: Funny, I don't remember . . . I think she was at some point one of the core people. There were probably other feminist groupings. I know the law school had its own women's group very early, even if there were very few [members]. Laura Tyson was another member of this group that Lenore started. You know who she is?

Shalin: Who is she?

Arlene Skolnick: She is an economist. She was head of the business school, she was in Clinton's administration, and I think she is in Obama's administration, an economic advisor. She was one of the campus feminists early on. I don't know what else I can tell you.

Shalin: Given that the opportunities for women with professional degrees were limited, what were some of the professional outlets available to them?

Arlene Skolnick: Maybe occasionally I was employed full time, but I had my first kid just as we came to Berkeley. The longitudinal studies at the Institute of Development just had their first follow up, so they had masses of data to analyze, and they needed a clinical psychologist, which I was at that point. So I was sort of perfectly situated for the job and the job was well suited to me, because I could take case histories home and work on them. And then I remained at the institute ever since, on and off.

Shalin: Was it part time?

Arlene Skolnick: Well, it was full time, but it was sort of a matriarchy. It was one of those alternative pathways for women. Some of the women there were quite distinguished and may have had appointments in psychology, but most of the people

didn't. Nancy Bailey was there, Jean McFarlane, Mary Cover Jone, probably people you don't know.

Shalin: No I don't, but what you are telling me is interesting. Go ahead.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, many of them were leading psychologists in child development, but they had sort of a tenuous relationship with the department of psychology. If they had appointments, they didn't have offices there and spent most of their time in the institute.

Shalin: And they had Ph.D.'s.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes. There was always a male head of it, usually a sociologist. [John] Clausen was head of it when I got there. Guy Swanson was there, another head. Later they tended to be developmental psychologists

Shalin: I think Gertrude Selznick had a Ph.D.

Arlene Skolnick: Oh, yes she did. She was in the sociology department.

Shalin: In what capacity?

Arlene Skolnick: I believe she was a full member of the faculty.

Shalin: She and her husband were both employed in the sociology department?

Arlene Skolnick: Yes. She taught a course on Freud, interestingly, in the sociology department, a Freud seminar, which I took and a number of other people did. It was great. She was really a great teacher. The relationship between Gertrude and Philip – it is a whole other saga [**laughing**].

Shalin: I don't want to press, but if there is anything you wish to share . . .

Arlene Skolnick: It was unusual for there to be a couple in the sociology department, for there to be a woman and also a spouse. Gertrude was a brilliant but difficult person. She was always railing against Phil, including the way he treated her in the department, the way the department treated her. She was known for airing her dirty linen in public, constantly ranting and raving about Phil in the department, but she was brilliant, she was a great teacher. For some reason I was never particularly close to her. But she had close relationships with other women. I can't remember who now. I wasn't one of them.

Shalin: Her name comes up in the memoirs posted in the Goffman archives. One reason I am interested in faculty spouses is that Schuyler Goffman, Erving's wife, had a position somewhat similar to yours, except that she didn't have a Ph.D., only M.A. that she had earned at the University of Chicago.

Arlene Skolnick: Aha!

Shalin: She defended her thesis (I discovered it at the University of Chicago library), a year after Erving defended his. Her thesis was on upper class women's personality traits, and she quotes in it Erving's thesis.

Arlene Skolnick: She did what?

Shalin: Schuyler defended her M.A. thesis in 1950, and she quotes in it her future husband, Erving Goffman.

Arlene Skolnick: Oh-h!

Shalin: Her study was on upper class Bostonian women and the way they maintain their status and lifestyle, which clearly dovetails with Goffman's first publication on symbols of class status.

Arlene Skolnick: That's so interesting! I didn't get to know her very well. Jerry and Erving were not particularly close. I didn't realize she had a professional degree.

Shalin: Yes, she had. In 1963 she quit work to go back to graduate school and finish her Ph.D.

Arlene Skolnick: Aha!

Shalin: I discovered some of her letters where she indicates that much.

Arlene Skolnick: Did she do it?

Shalin: No, she committed suicide a few months after she resigned her job at the Survey Research Center. She was a remarkable woman who shared interest with Erving, helped him edit his manuscripts. It looks like she put on hold her professional aspirations but then decided to establish her own professional identity. That didn't work out.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, yes.

Shalin: Any memoires of her that you may have from your encounters with Schuyler, some affective hallo surrounding her? Or is it too distant an encounter?

Arlene Skolnick: As I say, I didn't get to know her very well. I only saw her on larger group occasions, and the most intimate setting was in a Chinese restaurant with eight people. Other than that, these were big parties.

Shalin: Any memories from that restaurant outing, the way she dressed, spoke?

Arlene Skolnick: I don't remember. I was very pregnant at the time [**laughing**], a couple of weeks before I gave birth. I remember it was the Chinese New Year, and my son was born February 10. So I was preoccupied with other things, I think.

Shalin: Neither Schuyler's nor Erving's behavior stood out.

Arlene Skolnick: No, nothing stood out. She seemed sort of quiet, so far as I could tell.

Shalin: She was not an outgoing type.

Arlene Skolnick: Not as far as I was concerned. She might have been in other settings where she was. I wasn't even aware of her professional interests.

Shalin: Few people seem to know that. I discovered it belatedly. When did you get your Ph.D.?

Arlene Skolnick: I got Ph.D. in psychology at Yale in 1962.

Shalin: Perhaps this is where you met Jerry.

Arlene Skolnick: No, no, no, we were married before.

Shalin: And your dissertation was on . . . ?

Arlene Skolnick: Basically, on cognitive dissonance theory.

Shalin: Ah, Festinger's theory.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, and it was very popular among the social psychologists at Yale. The idea was that you didn't really do a dissertation on something you were deeply interested in. It was like get it done, get out, and then do what you want to do. It had to be very experimental, not in tune with real human issues. This was before the cognitive revolution,

Shalin: By the way, Jane Piliavin was a student of Festinger, whom she recalls in her memoir.

Arlene Skolnick: Aha!

Shalin: You might want to check it sometime.

Arlene Skolnick: Was it published?

Shalin: No, all the Goffman memoirs are posted online.

Arlene Skolnick: I didn't realize she was a part of it.

Shalin: I sent a note to her husband, along with a few memoirs, but he died before he could answer, which he planned to do, according to Jane.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, I heard that [he died].

Shalin: She shared with me her husband's memories, as well as her own. To go back to your dissertation, you did your college work at . . .

Arlene Skolnick: Queens College. By the way, I have an autobiographical piece in – what is it called? – *Our Lives, Our Work* [*Our Studies, Ourselves*], something like that. I don't know if you know that.

Shalin: No. I am familiar with the book of memoirs by Berkeley women sociologists.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, *Our Studies, Our Selves* is not all by Berkeley people, and it's not all by women. It is sociology in general. Rosanna Hertz [?] is one of the authors. I think it is still around, it is by the University of California Press.

Shalin: Wonder if it is available on line.

Arlene Skolnick: Amazon.com might have it.

Shalin: I'll try to tack it. And after Queens you applied to Yale?

Arlene Skolnick: No [**laughing**]. It's a story in itself. I was in comparative literature when I was in college. I got a Fulbright to go to France to study 19th century literature, but I had met Jerry. He couldn't join me because he would have been drafted if he left school. So I came back after three months. I applied to English

department at Yale but I didn't get in. I was told that they were not friendly to women, Jewish women in particular. Then I applied to the history department, and it was the same story. A friend of mine discovered a backdoor into the psychology department, which was to take a master's degree in education, in teaching, and then you can take any courses you want. Those weren't specifically education courses, I don't think there weren't any courses, but it was just a master's degree. And if you did well in that year, you could get into the department. So I did that.

Shalin: And later you got into the Ph.D. program.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes.

Shalin: In '62 you defended your thesis.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes.

Shalin: So you went to Berkeley with the Ph.D. in hand.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, yes.

Shalin: And when did you become a full time teacher?

Arlene Skolnick: I never become a full time teacher. I was on the research staff. This was a whole other career path at Berkeley. At some point you have to be approved by the faculty senate, and I was approved, but there was no slot, no FTE position there. It was sort of a license to write grants. Part of my story is that there was lots of research money lying around in the '60s, and it dried up. At that point I started writing family textbooks, got into family matters as a result of working on the longitudinal data. So I wrote this family textbook which became very successful. In fact, I am just editing the 16th edition [**laughing**]. I have to get back to it.

Shalin: The 16th edition? You've done something right.

[**Laughter**]

Arlene Skolnick: The first editions of that made a lot of money. In fact, I was making more money than Jerry.

Shalin: Really [**laughing**]?

Arlene Skolnick: The royalties on the book. That was just a little while, but that seems like a reasonable alternative career path. We always were dedicated to living in Berkeley. Both of us got joint offers at different time to different places, but we always wanted to stay in Berkeley.

Shalin: That changed eventually.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, I wrote about it in that reading. I can send you a reference.

Shalin: I would appreciate that. So you stayed in this research track throughout your career.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, I occasionally taught a course here and there, but I always found teaching very hard work taking an endless amount of time, for which I wasn't well suited. I liked doing research and writing.

Shalin: Your career path fitted your temperament and career aspirations.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, it did.

Shalin: Jerry tells me that . . .

Arlene Skolnick: Excuse me, just one second . . . I am on the phone . . .

[**Pause**]

Arlene Skolnick: Hello?

Shalin: Jerry told me that you had a chance to interact with people from Columbia.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes.

Shalin: And the interactions you had with people like Merton were mostly social occasions, right?

Arlene Skolnick: That's right. And that was later on, after Jerry's 60th birthday.

Shalin: Jerry told me a fascinating story how Merton took him to Ellis Island.

Arlene Skolnick: Yes, yes. We got to be friendly with him.

Shalin: I do appreciate your sharing your memoirs. Do you know if Jerry is available to wrap up my conversation with him?

Arlene Skolnick: Not today. He is about to go off to the dentist. He is starting to teach.

Shalin: Yes, the semester is starting. Do you know a day when he may have time, when it might be good for me to call?

Arlene Skolnick: Maybe on a Friday. He doesn't teach on Friday.

Shalin: OK, you might want to mention this to Jerry, although it is possible that I have exhausted his patience.

Arlene Skolnick: I'll tell him.

Shalin: Very good talking to you, Arlene. Thank you so much.

Arlene Skolnick: Good talking to you.

Shalin: Bye-bye.

Arlene Skolnick: Bye-bye.

[End of the recording]