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Ann Swidler
University of California - Berkeley

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Ann Swidler: Goffman Was an Intense Perfectionist about His Writing, Putting Sheet after Sheet into the Typewriter and Then Throwing Each Away

Dr. Ann Swidler, Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley, wrote this memoir at the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave her permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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July 11, 2010

Hi dimitri,

I did know Erving Goffman slightly: I was on his floor at the Center for International Affairs when he was visiting at Harvard in 1966-67, and I occasionally stopped by his office to chat. I baby-sat for his son once that year, and then I saw him again when I started graduate school at Berkeley in 1967 and took one course from him. I saw something of his work methods as he laid out hundreds of strips of paper on a table with field notes and other materials in order to piece together the anecdotes and examples on which he based the arguments of his books. I also have the impression that he was an intense perfectionist about his writing, putting sheet after sheet into the typewriter and then throwing each away as the sentence or paragraph turned out not to be quite what he had wanted.

I already knew Goffman's work very well, having taken Chad Gordon's course on Symbolic Interactionism when I was an undergraduate at Harvard, in which we read most of Goffman's work up through *Relations in Public*. Goffman's course was fascinating (I remember having Bridwhistle as a guest speaker and wonderful photographs of people spacing themselves out on park benches, like sparrows on a wire), but he had a system that allowed him to spend almost no time on course preparation or grading. There was no syllabus, just a huge bibliography. (The

students divided into groups and shared notes on the readings, the way today's students might prepare for their orals or their second-year exams.) Then the final examination was one question which was to organize the bibliography. He didn't have to read any papers, and I don't believe he read the final exams either. My suspicion is that we all got A's because that was easiest.

[the next comments may be omitted, if you are not including the less flattering aspects of Goffman's personality.]

Goffman was clearly an irritable, difficult person. Part of this was just that his work seemed so inviting, easy, and fun that a lot of not-terribly-good people seemed to assume that they could do what he did just by making some cute observations about the world and writing them up. Since he was so intensely serious about his work, I think he found this enormously aggravating. You might say that he didn't suffer fools gladly, and he was inundated with a lot of eager, maybe adoring fools. But the difficult parts of him were also more general. I think that he was so attuned to manners and interpersonal subtleties partly because he either couldn't be or didn't want to be conventionally "nice." I once said something that annoyed him, and he said "Every time you open your mouth, a frog drops out!" Another time he advised that Berkeley was the best place for graduate school, and then said (of course this was 1967, before women had a significant future in academia), "There's no point in your going to graduate school. The same thing always happens. The best looking woman in the cohort marries the smartest man, and she drops out." And after I baby-sat for his son for an evening he was furious that I had brought my boyfriend along and gave me a tongue lashing. At Berkeley, he was very brusque (I'm sure he didn't want me to presume on our acquaintance), but it wasn't just to me. He tried not to come into the Department until after 5pm so that he wouldn't have to encounter his colleagues, and I remember him coming in the evenings looking like a sort of furtive Colombo, trenchcoat and all.

I also remember one more thing, which was very interesting then and has stayed with me. At one point, Goffman said something like "The whole point of a dinner party is who isn't invited." What he

was talking about wasn't insulting people or hurting their feelings, but what I would now call the "semiotic" function of dinner parties and other social events in signaling who is in or out, who belongs or who doesn't.

Ann Swidler
Professor of Sociology
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, CA 94720-1980