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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Ruth A. Wallace about Erving Goffman entitled "Goffman Really Was Going out of His Way to Help People Who Were Different"

Ruth A. Wallace
George Washington University

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Ruth A. Wallace: Goffman Really Was Going out of His Way to Help People Who Were Different

This conversation with Dr. Ruth Wallace, Professor Emerita of George Washington University, was recorded over the phone on January 11, 2009. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, Dr. Wallace approved posting the present version on the web. 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 “[?]”.

[Posted 03-03-10]

Wallace: . . . You know, I never was his student.

Shalin: That’s all right.

Wallace: Are you doing [taping] it now?

Shalin: Yes, I do.

Wallace: First of all, I was in a religious community then, and I had a habit on, the full habit, so the only thing he [Goffman] saw was my face and my hands. Erving really loved to get together with different kinds of people. I went to [see him] one time when I wanted to take a class from him. Erving said, “No, no, the numbers are all out. I can’t seat you in any more.” I said, “I am really sorry about that because you are one of the professors I really wanted to know.” He said, “Close the door.” I closed the door and he said, “Don’t tell anybody but you can sit in the back of my class when I am teaching.”

Shalin: Wonderful!

Wallace: I got to listen to some of that, you know. But as I said, Erving really reached out to people who were different, [and he did it] in a very kind way. He told me I couldn’t take his class, and then he said, “Just a minute. I am going to whisper it in you.” And

he whispered it to me, "Just go sit in the back. You can watch me teaching" [**laughing**]. But I really didn't . . . I only saw him a few times when I was there. He wasn't my counselor or anything, but I was fascinated by him. He really was all out for people who were different, and of course most people at Berkeley at that time didn't see very many women in habits. He was thrilled about that. He asked me as much as he could, but I didn't have a lot to say. Then I said, "I'd love to take your class," and he said, "Just a minute. Close the door." Then he said, "Sister, you can sit the back of the room but don't tell anybody."

[**Laughter**]

Wallace: He didn't want big classes.

Shalin: You interpreted this gesture as a kind acknowledgement of your difference, but he didn't want anyone else to know.

Wallace: I do think that he really felt he was different too.

Shalin: How come? Was it his Jewishness?

Wallace: I don't know that. He was Jewish and I of course am Catholic. I think he really was, how should I put it, [going] out of his way to help people who were different. It was very hard for me in the beginning, with my habit on. Some people wouldn't even look at me. They were anti-Catholic. I couldn't take my habit off. He spent some time with me at his office because I think he felt himself he was different.

Shalin: You sensed he might have carried some stigma?

Wallace: No. People had written about stigma, but no. He was a very kind person. He had a lot of work that he had to do and he didn't want people coming into his office and use a lot of time because he needed to get his work done. But he was very kind to me and one of the reasons was that he was different like I was. If I had regular clothes on, I don't think he would have paid any attention to me. . . . When I was at the university, our sisters were living in California and I lived with them. Can you hear me?

Shalin: Yes, yes, very well.

Wallace: Somebody's uncle was to give a car away to one of our convents and I had to get over to campus every day, so I got to use this little car. That way I got back and forth. But you know, he wouldn't agree that I was really in his class. He didn't want a lot of classes.

Shalin: Do you remember which class it was?

Wallace: Well, I only sat in on it once or twice.

Shalin: You didn't take the whole class.

Wallace: No, he told me he didn't want to have another class. And I think he said, "Close the door" [**laughing**]. Here I am with my habit on and he said, "If you want to hear my class, you sit toward the back."

Shalin: Do you remember when it was?

Wallace: Around '68, I think.

Shalin: Before he left for Pennsylvania.

Wallace: Yes, that's right. He was still at Berkeley.

Shalin: Anything stuck in your memory about his general appearance, the way he dressed?

Wallace: He was casual. He was not a very tall man, I remember.

Shalin: How tall was he?

Wallace: Oh, gosh. Well, I am 5'7. He was not really a tall man, but his kindness really struck me. He was always interested in people who were different from himself. Of course I was the first nun they ever had in the sociology department. I was interested in his class, but he said, "No, no, it is all filled." I said, "Could I at least listen?" And he said, "Close the door . . ."

Shalin: Jackie Wiseman mentioned that you might have experienced something like a role conflict.

Wallace: I took courses in sociology when I was in high school. Then I ended up in Berkley and I got my Ph.D. at Berkeley.

Shalin: That's right. Did you know Goffman's work before you came to see him?

Wallace: No, no. I had not.

Shalin: Why did you want to get into his class?

Wallace: Well, either somebody told me about him or I read something of his. And I was fascinated by his ideas. I was fascinated when I went to see Goffman that here I am in this habit, all he can see is my hands and my face. . . . Well, I was already taking so many classes I would have flunked if I took more. He tried to pretend he wasn't kindly, but he really was.

Shalin: You mean he came across as not very friendly but in reality he was.

Wallace: Oh, in reality he was very kindly. I think Erving was kindly to people who were sick, people who were . . . whatever. When I had told a couple of my [fellow] students that I saw Erving, they said, "You mean he let you come into his office, talked to you?" . . . He worked very hard to help anybody like that.

Shalin: He walked an extra mile to help people who were different. Was that the only occasion when you had a chance to observe Goffman?

Wallace: . . . I said, "Professor Goffman, can I sit on your class?" And then he said, "Close the door." And I thought, "Boy, am I in trouble."

Shalin: You said you were fascinated with Goffman's ideas. How did they impress you?

Wallace: Well, I think he was different. Maybe something happened to him in his life when he . . . Could you hold a minute?

Shalin: Sure, sure.

Wallace: The TV is on . . . He knocked himself out to people who were different, because it is not easy, you know, whether you are black instead of white. He couldn't have been more kindly. I understand why he wouldn't let me take it. I couldn't take another class anyway. You could only do so many classes there. . . .

Shalin: Ruth, could you tell me what in Goffman's writings attracted you? Was there anything that resonated with your experience?

Wallace: Number one, my mother died when I was 12. We have three girls in our family, one is still alive. My sister Dorothy, my dear friend, she died of cancer and I am still alive. I feel that with Goffman there was no pretence. He clearly wanted to help people in trouble. He was very kind to me. And I don't think he was trying to find out what my life was like or anything. In the end, when I said to him, "Erving, I can't take your class because I have already got as many course as I can take," he said, "Sit in the back of the room, then you can come in and listen." That was really kindly of him, you know.

Shalin: Did you use Goffman's ideas in your work?

Wallace: Oh, yes. . . . I've written a lot about women (I wish I had my books in front of me) who had different kinds of jobs. For a long time women had to stay home and take care of the kinds. When I was in my religious community, I had taught in their grammar school and high school, and when they sent me for my Ph.D., they sent me to Berkeley because our community lived in Berkeley. And so he told me, "You can't tell anybody but you can sit at the back of my class room . . ." And I did. I wish I kept the notes. Most people thought he was different, that something was wrong with him, you know, but he was so kindly to me. Here I am with this crazy habit; it is scary to people because it is like a

policeman with his uniform on, and I was afraid nobody was going to talk to me. He took that time with me because he felt that he and I were in the same boat.

Shalin: Wonder what exactly made Erving different.

Wallace: It is very hard to characterize him. See, here I am, a Roman Catholic nun in a habit, and there is Erving Goffman who couldn't have been kinder to me and let me sit in his class. I remember one student asking me, "Sister, are you taking this class?" I said, "No, I am just sitting in." I didn't say anything more, I didn't want to get him into trouble. He had a heart of gold but he pretended that he didn't.

Shalin: He pretended that he was not kind – how do you mean it?

Wallace: He wasn't unkind to me at all.

Shalin: Not to you.

Wallace: See, a lot of students wanted to take his class, and he said, "Absolutely not!"

Shalin: Why not?

Wallace: He only wanted so many students in his class.

Shalin: How did he select them?

Wallace: That's a good question. I don't know. The reason I got in there was because I was different. I don't know if he felt sorry for me or what. I didn't take class for credit. He said sit in the back or whatever. I couldn't take any more credits anyway. I was taking a bunch of other stuff. But he was different and I was different, that's why he [let me in].

Shalin: I am grateful for your sharing these memoirs, Ruth. What caught my ear is you saying that Goffman pretended to be one kind of person but was in fact quite another.

Wallace: There were a couple of priests in the department.

Shalin: Do you think he would treat male priests differently than nuns?

Wallace: Well, the nuns don't have anywhere the importance that priests do. . . . Men as priests are in charge, a nun is not. I think Erving went out of his way for people who were not in charge. . . . I think anybody like me who was different, he would be more kindly to.

Shalin: Which ideas of Erving are most important to you?

Wallace: The problem is I just sat in on his class. I wasn't really in it very much.

Shalin: But you read some of his books.

Wallace: I read some, yes. I don't know how many.

Shalin: Like *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Wallace: Yes, *Presentation of Self*. I have it upstairs. It's been awhile since I read that.

Shalin: He also wrote *Asylums*.

Wallace: I don't know if I read that one.

Shalin: *Asylums*, about people in mental hospitals.

Wallace: *Asylums*, oh yes, I have that upstairs. First of all, he is very smart. Also, his heart is not hard-hearted. I think deep down he is warm with people. I don't know what happened to him during his life, if he ever got into trouble or whatever, but . . .

Shalin: . . . he was sympathetic to people without power. How would he treat people with power?

Wallace: I don't think he would give them the time of day. I think he bent over to help people who were different from the ordinary. He never acted like he had a warm heart but deep down he had a warm heart. . . .

Shalin: Some people recall difficult time they had with Erving.

Wallace: I think as soon as the students start pretending that they know everything, that's when Erving wouldn't give them the time of day. That is my guess. When I went in, I thought I would only be in there for five minutes, but I was there for quite some time. He didn't look at his watch and say, "You have to go now." I've done that. I have done [teaching] at GW for 40 years, and I've got to know the names [of my students]. I loved it when I was going to school that people knew my name. I tried to learn them all. I don't think Erving worried about names, really. Deep down he cared about people who were out of the way, who were different. See, I was so different, a nun on campus in the sociology department. It could have been a bad experience. I was living with some of the nuns there, coming everyday to campus. I was there during the free speech movement.

Shalin: Did you take classes with Herbert Blumer?

Wallace: Herb Blumer, yes. . . . He is a wonderful kind man. He was like my grandfather, you know. He would help with anything. If you needed some help, he would help you. I really appreciated that. During the free speech movement, I never forget that, Erving didn't want to miss anything. I was fascinated by the free speech movement. I had my habit on, but I didn't want to get community in trouble. So I sat under a tree, and I heard the whole free speech movement. I was standing with one of my colleagues, and he said [?] My name was Sister [John Baptist ?], my dad's name was John so I took that name. I said, "I want to watch this, but I don't want my community to get in trouble." So I was under that tree with a couple of friends of mine, big [?] guys. We watch the free speech movement, and I was so excited about that.

Shalin: What was Erving's politics, do you know?

Wallace: I didn't see him as interested in politics. He was more interested in people and problems. He felt sorry for people. He was very warm, he felt sorry for people who were blind or whatever. He pretended he didn't have a heart but I think he had a real heart.

Shalin: Do you remember Blumer as a teacher?

Wallace: Blumer was good, but he wasn't really exciting. He was very smart. He wrote to me a nice letter of recommendation when I was out trying to get a job after I got my Ph.D. I taught in my community for a while, then I came to GW years and taught there for 30 years.

Shalin: Any other teachers at Berkley that you remember fondly?

Wallace: Phil Selznick was another one. I think I took his class, but I don't remember him very well. I can picture Herb Blumer and Erving.

Shalin: There was also Kornhauser.

Wallace: I never took his class.

Shalin: Also Shibutani.

Wallace: I knew him but I never took a class with him. I was really into, what do you call it . . . women. I felt like women should have more chances to get jobs. That's why when I taught at GW all those years I really encouraged women. When I came, there were six professors who were men and only two of us who were women at GW. When I was retiring, I said to the chair of the department, "Look, I am ready to retire, but I have all that data that I didn't have a chance to write up, but I don't want a man to take my position. I'll stay here for 30 more years because I want a woman to have a chance."

Shalin: Well, I am grateful for your memories, Ruth. I will transcribe our conversation and send it to you. Perhaps you can

add more stuff later on.

Wallace: Send it to me, and that will remind me of things, because I do have a memory loss. I am 76 years old now, you know. Then I was much younger.

Shalin: Will do that. Thank you very much.

Wallace: You are welcome.

Shalin: Bye bye.

Wallace: Bye now.