

2-25-2009

Dmitri Shalin Interview with Jack Whalen about Erving Goffman entitled "I Read Presentation of Self, and It Was Like Nothing I Ever Read – “Oh, My God, That Is Sociology?””

Jack Whalen
Palo Alto Research Center

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

Whalen, J. (2009). Dmitri Shalin Interview with Jack Whalen about Erving Goffman entitled "I Read Presentation of Self, and It Was Like Nothing I Ever Read – “Oh, My God, That Is Sociology?””. In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-5.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/73

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

Jack Whalen: I Read *Presentation of Self*, and It Was Like Nothing I Ever Read – “Oh, My God, That Is Sociology?”

This conversation with Jack Whalen, Principal Scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), in their Computing Science Laboratory, was recorded on August 1, 2008, during the ASA meeting in Boston. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the conversation, Jack Whalen corrected the transcript and gave his permission to post the present version of the exchange 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 “[?]”. The interviewer’s questions are shortened in several places.

[Posted 02-25-09]

Shalin: Do you mind sharing your story? . . .

Whalen: As interesting as it is. . . .

Shalin: Don’t mean to impose, but every little bit counts.

Whalen: Well, Erving Goffman is the reason I am a sociologist.

Shalin: Really?

Whalen: Yes. It was 1967, my first year of college. My girlfriend, and now my wife, Marilyn, was taking some courses at Temple. I was a history major at Las Salle College South. She brought me this book, *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, which I think was in her intro sociology book. I read it, and it was like nothing I ever read. I was just like, “Oh, my God, that is sociology?”

Shalin: So much fun. You just stumbled on him.

Whalen: Yeah. So, seriously, it took the mundane settings and situations of day-to-day life and showed how they were put together, how they were assembled. Eventually, it kind of led me to Garfinkel and Sacks. But it all started with Goffman. A number of people wrote about their [Garfinkel, Sacks, and Goffman]

relationship, and we talk about “the interaction order” now, but [back then] he used that wonderful term “interaction rituals.” I bought every book that he wrote. Just went to the store and. . . .

. . .

Whalen: One quote I remember more than anything: “Not men and their moments, but moments and their men.” Syntax of human relations. After Presentation of Self, that made perfect sense to me.

Shalin: I do have some issues with this point, as it overlooks the role of emergent grammars. . . .

. . .

Whalen: There was also one other thing about Goffman. I was very much active in the student movement, SDS. . . . So, how do you reconcile my passion for this kind of [Goffmanian] sociology with the study of social movements, about which I was actually writing about? Anyway, that was another problem. There was something he wrote – forget where it was.

. . .

Manning: That was in Relations in Public where he wrote, “Why don’t people shit on people’s desks over and over again instead of asking them why they do such things?”

Whalen: Yes, he was thinking about the Columbia University [student] takeover. So, Goffman says, [in reference to criticisms that he wasn’t studying things like class relations], “I just sneak in and watch them [the working masses] snore.”

. . .

Whalen: It’s been a persistent issue with Garfinkel. . . . [some radical critics would say to the ethnomethodologists,] “The cities are burning and you are picking hairs off a dead fly’s ass.”

. . .

Whalen: Anyway, that was my Goffman story.

Shalin: I thought you were just warming up. . . .

Whalen: So, I did a number of things. Basically, I drove a taxicab in Philadelphia. . . . Finally, I decided it was time to go to graduate school. I applied to U of P, to UC Santa Barbara, which is where I ended up going. I was accepted at U of P – the reason I applied was because Goffman was there.

Shalin: And the year was. . . .

Whalen: 1976. U of P rang me up, trying to persuade me to go. I said, "OK, I will come to visit." I lived in Philadelphia. "Who do you want to meet on the faculty?" I said, "Goffman." "Oh, I don't know if we can arrange that."

[Laughter]

Whalen: Plus, he is in anthropology. I said, "No, Goffman is my bottom line." And they did it. So, Goffman rings me up and says, "Come over to my house?" What I got to see was the domestic Goffman. . . . And it was this lovely townhouse. I remember that.

Shalin: A two-story place?

Whalen: Yeah. It is a domestic scene, you know. He invites me in, he is very sweet, he has a table set up in front of this big picture window. We are going to have tee, have a chat. And that's what we did. You know, "Tell me about yourself." He was the sweetest guy. I have heard all these stories about him – [but to me] he was the sweetest man. And then his teenage son pops in, "Hey dad, can I borrow your car?" Blah, blah, blah. You know. He says, "You should come here or go to the University of Chicago. Nothing else would do if you really want to be an ethnographer."

. . . .

Whalen: That was [once] his place. I don't know, we spent about an hour just talking. I cannot remember everything we talked about.

Shalin: And he was nice and. . . .

Whalen: Sweet as can be.

Shalin: Did you see there a piano? I have a story by a Russian émigré sociologist, Vladimir Shlapentokh, who visited Goffman in Philadelphia.

. . . .

Whalen: That was 32 years ago!

[Laughter]

Shalin: How did your meeting end?

Whalen: It wasn't like he was promoting U of P or his department. It was like why was I interested, why did I want to be an ethnographer?

Shalin: You were accepted at U of P, Goffman was there – why did you end up at Santa Barbara?

Whalen: Because there were no ethnomethodologists at U of P.

Shalin: You already knew the difference.

Whalen: We-e-e-ll, I tried to read Garfinkel.

[Laughter]

Whalen: I think I read the turn-taking paper, thinking "What the heck!" Santa Barbara had [Don] Zimmerman and [Tom] Wilson.

Shalin: Tom Scheff was also there.

Whalen: Plus, it was California. . . . I never was west of Pittsburgh, so I flew to California, drove down the Pacific coast, saw Big Sur, and thought to myself, "There is no comparison."

[**Laughter**]

Shalin: Did you meet Garfinkel?

Whalen: More like at the ASA meeting.

Shalin: No Garfinkel stories.

Whalen: Actually, I have nothing but sweet stories about Garfinkel.

[**End of the recording**]