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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Eviatar Zerubavel about Erving Goffman entitled "Studying with Erving Goffman"

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Eviatar Zerubavel: Studying with Erving Goffman

This interview with Eviatar Zerubavel, Board of Governors Professor of Sociology at Rutgers University, was recorded on August 2, 2008, during the ASA meeting in Boston. After Dmitri Shalin transcribed the interview, Dr. Zerubavel corrected the transcript and gave his approval for posting the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives. Breaks in the conversation flow are indicated by ellipses. Supplementary information appears in square brackets. Undecipherable words and unclear passages are identified in the text as “[?]”. The interviewer’s questions are shortened in several places.

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Shalin: Today is what – August 3?

Zerubavel: Second.

Shalin: August 2, 2008. I am talking to Eviatar Zerubavel who kindly agreed to talk to me about Erving Goffman. I had no idea that you were a student of Goffman. I would like to pick your brain about Erving, starting with how you met.

Zerubavel: I came to Penn in 1972 specifically to study with him. I came from Tel Aviv University, where the only thing I had to read of Goffman during my undergraduate career there was a section on total institutions assigned for a class on sociology of education. I never knew about the rest of his works. Then, I was working towards the Masters, TA’ing in a course “Introduction to Sociology.” That was a class taught by Avi Cordova, an Israeli sociologist, student of Paul Kecskemeti. He taught in his class *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and I was just stunned. So I started reading *Stigma* and *Behavior in Public Places*. *Relations in Public* just came out that year. I read that, as well as *Encounters*. I was just fascinated by him. I couldn’t believe that I hadn’t heard much about him in Tel Aviv, so I assumed that he was not a very well known sociologist. In my mind, he was the most brilliant sociologist I had ever read, and I thought I wanted to study with him. So I applied to Penn and got there.

I arrived there as a graduate student, saw that in the fall he was teaching a course on social interaction, signed up for it – or so I thought. It was Monday morning, the first day of the school year. The class was to meet at ten in the morning at the university museum, because his primary appointment was in anthropology. I hadn't realized that at Penn he was not in sociology but at the anthropology department. He had joint appointments at 6 or 7 different departments. He was a Benjamin Franklin professor, but his home base was in anthropology. They were located in the museum, which is where he taught. I didn't know any of that at the time. I looked up his office and went there. It was still half an hour before the class began. The door was open, I looked in and saw a filing cabinet with a drawer pulled out, and a short man sitting there and working. I came in, introduced myself, and said, "My name is Eviatar Zerubavel. I just came from Tel Aviv last week, and I came to study with you." His response was, "What department are you in?" I said, "Sociology." He said: "Don't hold your breath." Only later did I understand that he was in anthropology.

I know that in four years before I was there, the only sociology student he worked with was Samuel Heilman. Sam Heilman published a book, *Synagogue Life*, that was the dissertation he wrote with Goffman. I didn't know that. When I said I was from sociology and he told me, "Don't hold your breath," I realized that something was wrong.

Anyway, twenty minutes later the class began. About 40-50 students showed up – this was a graduate class, mind you. As soon as he enters, he says: "Well, there are about 50 of you. I can tell you right now that next week there will be about 15 of you. Let me tell you how I am going to do it. I am going to admit anyone who comes from anthropology, the Annenberg School of Communication (that's because Birdwhistell was there), folklore (because Dell Hymes was there), and linguistics (because of Bill Labov)

Shalin: Bateson had an influence on Goffman, especially on his frame analysis.

Zerubavel: Yes, I know. Bateson was one of the most eminent names. And that's it – everyone else registered for the class would

have to write a petition. The following year my wife was enrolled in the department of folklore, and she got into his course just like that, but I had to write a petition because I came from sociology. I couldn't believe it.

Shalin: I want to make sure I understand – Goffman told the students that he didn't want them in his class if they came from such and such departments? Could he really just kick out those who registered for his class?

Zerubavel: Oh, at that time at Penn prima donnas like him could do it. . . . And he also didn't like to teach or work with students. He was a very reluctant teacher. Basically, he was saying, "I am allowing the rest of you to stay here today, but I am going to put a list on my office door with the names of students so you can see who gets in." Imagine, just a few days earlier I came from Tel Aviv to study with Goffman! Now I understood what his "Don't hold your breath" remark meant. It was unbelievable. . . . I was crying, thinking, "Why did I come to the US, what a mistake it was." I wrote a petition. . . .

Oh, sorry – he also gave us a one page sheet containing a list of 12-13 books and articles and said, "Everyone who comes next week is expected to have read that." For example, Manny Schegloff's article on telephone conversations.

Shalin: Goffman knew him from Berkeley.

Zerubavel: At that point he was very open to conversation analysis. I think Harvey Sacks also studied with Goffman at some point.

Shalin: Goffman was part of his dissertation committee, and according to Schegloff, he wouldn't give him a pass. Ultimately, the rest of the committee members urged Goffman to step down.

Zerubavel: Oh, that is very similar to my own story.

Shalin: Later on when somebody asked Goffman if Sacks was his student, Goffman said: "No, I was his student." But I don't want to

interrupt you. Please continue with your story – you wrote a petition. . .

Zerubavel: He wanted to know our background, if we took any courses in social interaction, any work we did we could submit as the justification. I wrote in my petition that unfortunately I didn't take any courses because none were available, and this is why I came to Penn. I wanted to study with him, I wanted to study with Bill Labov, with Dell Hymes, with Birdwhistell. I said I had a paper on language in the army that I wrote but that it was in Hebrew. I didn't have anything to show, but wrote that in the last year I had been swallowing readings on social interaction, and this is what I wanted to do. Next Monday I came, not knowing what I would find. Fortunately, I was on the list of 15 "elect."

Shalin: Some 35 students didn't make it.

Zerubavel: I mean, people came from urban design, peace studies. He was a big name.

Shalin: Were there any other sociology students on the list?

Zerubavel: Nobody. In all the years I was at Penn, there was one guy from Montana – don't remember his name, but I don't think he wrote a dissertation with him. And a year or two after me there was Carol Gardner who worked with Goffman. During – what – ten years or something like that, there was Sam Heilman who wrote a dissertation with him in sociology, I did my dissertation with him, and I think Carol Gardner too.

I'll tell you the story with my dissertation because it sounds typical, given what happened to Harvey Sacks. Throughout the four years I was there, Goffman was sending me mixed messages. For example, he told me after the first paper I wrote for him. . . . Well, it wasn't really a paper. We had to read the first few chapters of *Relations in Public* and write a review. I read the chapter "Territories of the Self" and was fascinated with his idea of non-spatial territories. I thought it was a great idea to take the concept of territoriality and extend it to non-spatial stuff like privacy. I wrote about time, and he wrote to me that it was a great idea. I

decided that would be my term paper and wrote this paper on non-spatial territories of the self – on privacy, information, and time. He wasn't very impressed, gave me a B+. He always kept saying that he didn't see how time could be a non-spatial territory. I had the idea about private time and public time, which had started right there, but he wasn't buying into it.

The next year I saw that he was teaching again a course on social interaction and called him to see if I could take it. He said, "No, no, no – you already took it." I said, "But it is not the same." You know, the course was basically showing slides and discussing them.

Shalin: I want to hear more about his teaching, but please continue with the story about your dissertation.

Zerubavel: Goffman was saying, "I feel very uncomfortable with you hearing me over and over again." I couldn't believe it. His class teaching was improvisational. He would say whatever he had to say about the slides as he watched them. But I convinced him to let me take this class. The whole course consisted in our looking at a television screen. Now, that was 1973, the beginning of video days. There was a video of a talk show of David Frost interviewing Norman Mailer and two feminists. Goffman wanted us to analyze the interaction. Basically, we spent the whole semester doing that – this was a very lousy course. Unlike the first one, which was very good, this one was analyzing one minute of interaction on the tape. Gail Jefferson was on a post doc there with another student of Harvey Sacks, and a lot of the seminar was his argument against the conversation analysts.

Anyway, after that course I had an idea for a dissertation on punctuality. I was very interested in the whole idea of developing a sociology of time and wanted to do a study of punctuality. I made an appointment to meet him. During the winter break I went to his house. I prepared for several days, figuring out what I wanted to say.

Shalin: He invited you to his house?

Zerubavel: Oh, yea. I had a whole spiel as to what I wanted to say. He asked me: "So, tell me what it is?" I said, "Well, I want to do it on punctuality." He immediately interrupted me, "So you mean about time." I said: "Yes." He said, "This is what you did for your paper." I said, "It is actually much more." He said, "But you cannot study time. What are you going to look at?" I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You need to study an 'animal,' something you can watch, and you cannot watch time." I was very upset. . . . "An animal? You mean like a frame, like stigma, like backstage?" He said, "Don't be cute. What I do is what I do, but you have to look at an animal, at a thing." I just felt that – he wouldn't even talk to me about my ideas.

Shalin: Do you mean he told you that that was a legitimate research topic for him but not appropriate for you?

Zerubavel: He basically said he couldn't see how one can study time. So, for the next year I abandoned that idea and started actually looking for some "animal." Eventually I decided to do fieldwork in an airport. I went to the Philadelphia airport two days in a row and did a lot of observations on what was going on there. And I saw it was a very rich setting to study. So I called him. I remember it was a street telephone booth. I called him and said, "I think I found the thing, the dissertation topic." He said, "What is it?" And I said, "Airports." Then I started telling him about it. He said, "You know what – it sounds very descriptive. I don't see here anything conceptual, analytical. Remember once you mentioned something about time?" That was the moment I realized he was just jerking me around.

Shalin: What exactly do you mean: deliberately sending you in a wrong direction or. . . .

Zerubavel: No, at that moment I just had a proto-idea of being jerked around. It took me some time to realize what he was actually doing, to realize what he was also doing to some other people in his orbit.

Shalin: What was he doing?

Zerubavel: I really think that he was. . . .

Shalin: He suffered so much himself when he was defending his dissertation.

Zerubavel: Wait, wait, there is more.

Shalin: Please, please, go ahead.

Zerubavel: I'll tell you more about my dissertation, so you can see the same pattern. On one hand, I felt lousy about him. On the other hand, I felt like, "Hey, I am getting to work on what I really wanted – time." This is when I took my comps, and I started developing a dissertation proposal. But I was so intimidated by him that I called it "Towards a Dissertation Proposal." The title page read "Towards a Dissertation Proposal Presented to Professor Erving Goffman." That is, not to a committee but to a specific person to approve it.

I didn't hear from him, and after several weeks I called and asked, "Have you read my proposal?" He said, "Yea, but that is not a proposal. It's an article, not a proposal. What are you going to study?" Again, the good thing was that he called it an "article," which made me rewrite it a couple more times and send it to *Sociological Inquiry*. That would be my first sociological article. But as for the proposal, Goffman told me it wasn't clear what I was going to study. . . . I worked for several more weeks, revising the proposal, but this time it was the "dissertation proposal," and it was presented not to Professor Goffman but actually given to ten or eleven people. I decided that whoever responds will be on my committee. Interestingly enough, I found the person willing to be a co-advisor, and it was exactly the way it happened to Sam Heilman, and it was exactly the same person. But it was a total serendipity.

Renée Fox was the chair of the department. I never had a course with her, never even had a conversation with her besides saying hello in the hallway. She read it, and she said, "I am on board. You did a fantastic thing." Victor Lidz and Harold Bershadly also loved it. . . .

Shalin: Harold?

Zerubavel: Let me spell it: B-e-r-s-h-a-d-y. These people responded very well. Actually, I gave the proposal to Parsons too. For three years Parsons was teaching at Penn. He said that he didn't understand why I was using terms like "control" and "rigidity." I guess that was too critical a perspective for his taste. Philip Rieff also responded in the same way. I gave the text to 11 people. Goffman was one of them, but he never responded. I was waiting when Harold Bershady told me that Goffman called him and said, "What's going on with Zerubavel?" Bershady told him, "Well, we are having a proposal defense, which is set on such and such a date." Goffman replied, "Oh, I want to come as well." This is how I found out that he was on the committee. . . . The proposal was very conceptual. I knew that I wanted to do fieldwork to observe actual temporal patterns, and I couldn't care less where it would be. I thought some interesting complex system would do. So, I suggested several possibilities – a newspaper, a law firm, a school. That's what I wrote in the proposal.

During the defense when his turn came, he said, "First of all, I want to say that two years ago Zerubavel wrote a paper on the non-spatial territories of the self, with which I didn't agree at the time. Now I think one can look at such territories."

Shalin: So, he did acknowledge your past efforts and accepted the idea. . . .

Zerubavel: Yea, but through the backdoor. He said, "I don't believe one could study time. But he should do the ethnography and see if one can detect temporal patterns." Then he turned to Renée and said, "Since you have connections at the hospital, why not have him do it in the hospital?" I said, "I don't mind." Rene asked, "Do you really want to do your fieldwork in the hospital?" I said, "I really don't care. I am going to find some patterns anywhere." So it was decided that I would do it in a hospital. But remember, he still said it won't be about time.

Shalin: Maybe one chapter?

Zerubavel: Maybe a chapter. So I did my observations in a hospital. I did there half of the observations, after which I went out to breathe and think and start writing. I started with the emergency room, wasn't sure if I wanted to continue there or switch to an in-patient unit. I wrote about 100 pages of analysis and asked people to respond. Renée Fox, Harold Bershad, and Victor Lidz all said, "Just continue observing in some other units, it doesn't matter which." He said, "Go back to the emergency room."

Shalin: "He" meaning "Goffman"?

Zerubavel: Yes, Goffman. He said, "Go back because you are writing about the emergency room." I said, "I am not writing about the emergency room. I am writing about time." He said, "You are not going to do the whole dissertation about time – how can you?" I said, "I am going to write the dissertation about time." So, we disagreed. And I just decided, "To hell with him," and went on to work in the in-patient unit. Then I wrote the dissertation, finished the dissertation, and gave it to my committee. We didn't have defenses then, so there was no defense. Oh, yes – the decision reached during the proposal defense was that Renée Fox and Goffman would be co-advisors. He thought that since my work would be in a hospital, where she, a world-known medical sociologist, had connections, that would be good. It turned out to be the greatest decision for me, because otherwise, I would still be without my Ph.D. Because of the jerking around. You could see a kind of sadistic pattern. The fact that Renée was my co-advisor. . . .

Shalin: Might have saved your career. . . .

Zerubavel: Not just "might" – it did save my career! You see, at the end of the dissertation he invited me to his house to give me feedback. We set for five hours, he gave me his feedback, we got to about the middle of the dissertation and decided to continue the next day – that's another five hours. Altogether we sat for 10 hours. He was very serious, gave me a fabulous feedback. On the other hand, he started with something like, "This is a nice piece on the hospital. My son is going to medical school, I'll let him read it." Which was a kind of putdown, a strange thing to say.

Shalin: Maybe in the context it was not meant to be a putdown, but rather, "Gee, that's really interesting. Do you mind if I share it with my son who is. . . ."

Zerubavel: After those ten hours, I told him, "I have one big question left – what about the last chapter?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "There is another chapter there on the whole cognitive dimension of time reckoning. This is the chapter I am most excited about." He said, "What are you talking about?" He then looked, and it was there in his folder. He hadn't read it. I said, "I cannot believe it – this is the chapter I am most excited about!"

Shalin: You told this to him in those very terms?

Zerubavel: Oh, yea. He said, "I didn't notice it," or something like that. Meanwhile, I was leaving for Pittsburgh for my first job. He said, "The next time you are in Philly, lets meet, and I will give you feedback on your last chapter." In the meantime, I got my degree. The next time I came to Philly was for the Eastern Sociological Society meeting in 1977. I called him beforehand, made an appointment, came to his house to talk about the last chapter, but we didn't talk about the last chapter for some reason. He asked me, "What are you doing?" I got a research job at a psychiatric hospital, which had nothing to do with my interests. I told him that I started to revise my dissertation into a book. He said, "a book? You don't have a book there. Why should you be writing a book? You should write articles." I said, "I am writing articles too." He said, "a book about time – how can you do that?" I said, "What kind of articles do you have in mind?" He said, "What you need to do if you are interested in developing a sociology of time is to take a system of time, like a calendar, and see how it changes during a time of upheaval." I said, "I cannot believe you are telling this to me." He said, "Why?" "Because a year and a half ago I gave you a paper I wrote on what the French Republicans did reforming the calendar. You never got back to me on that." He said, "You gave me this paper?" I said, "Yes, even before I started my fieldwork in a hospital. You never got back to me. And that's

exactly what they did – changed everything in the calendar. He said, “I don’t know. . . .”

Poetic justice: Just as I came back to Pittsburgh, there was a letter to me from the ASR that they accepted my article. The same article that he didn’t remember.

That was 1977. Two years later I saw him at the ASA meeting. Didn’t see him before that. We were on two escalators facing each other, so the conversation was very short. He said something like, “What about that book – have you decided to do it?” I said, “Yea, I actually finished it, and it has been accepted.” He said, “Where?” I said, “University of Chicago Press.” He said, “Not bad,” or something like that. Anyway, the book came out, I sent it him, thanking him for his influence, of course. Never heard a word from him. I told Renée Fox that he probably never got it. Several months later she told me that she was at his house for dinner when he pulled the book out, showed it to his guests, and said, “This was my student.”

Shalin: I so much enjoy listening to you, your story invokes Goffman so vividly. If you read my paper, you will find there remarks from several of Goffman’s students. The reason John Irwin declined to put Goffman on his committee was that he had heard from other students about their experiences. Was this your last encounter with Goffman?

Zerubavel: That was the last time I saw him, on the escalator.

Shalin: To back up a bit, you said you liked the first class you took with Goffman.

Zerubavel: It was very good for me. I have a friend who took it a year later and who left half-way through, saying, “I didn’t learn anything. I didn’t learn anything I didn’t know.” I said, “Yes, but did you think about that stuff before the class?” He said, “Yea, but this is all everyday stuff you see around all the time.” I said, “That is his genius.” You have to have a feel for his perspective in order to appreciate it. The whole course was just watching slides, many of which he later used in *Gender Advertisements*. There were many

others no one ever saw. We would go around the room to see if anybody had to say something. And when nobody had anything else to say, he would say a few words himself. It was unbelievable, because you could see a brilliant guy thinking *in vivo*. You look at a slide with three persons, and you wonder what is there to see. Fifteen people – smart people – would try to come up with something. Then, Goffman would chime in – and it was not just some little speck he saw that we couldn't see. It was how the whole thing was configured, and it was amazing. The guy single-handedly created the field of social interaction. He had an eye for such configurations.

It's interesting – he once said in class something no teacher should say: "Actually, I had only one real student ever."

Shalin: In his entire life?

Zerubavel: That's what he said, which made everybody feel very bad. He said, "It was Sherri Cavan." I told that to Sherri, "You don't know it, but this is what he said – you were the only real student he ever had." I think she said that he never let her feel like she was a good student.

Shalin: What does it mean "real student" – interested, serious, smart?

Zerubavel: What he meant was that she did a great ethnography.

Shalin: I see.

Zerubavel: She wrote *Liquor License*. That's an excellent ethnography, but what about all the rest of his students?

Shalin: How did other students. . . .

Zerubavel: Oh, oh, there were two other things in my Penn history I forgot to tell you that have nothing to do with my dissertation. There was a proseminar taught by Diana Crane. She taught all the first-year students. At that point I was in my third

year. She taught from Nicholas Mullins' book about schools in sociology. Every week she taught another chapter from this book. When she got to symbolic interaction and ethnomethodology, she invited Goffman, who said, "I am not interested, but why don't you invite Zerubavel. He can talk about it, and after the break I'll come and just critique it."

Shalin: Critique the chapter or you?

Zerubavel: Whatever. So, I came and made a presentation on ethnomethodology the way Mullins wrote about it. He didn't even come to my talk. During the break there was a big excitement built up, for he never showed up in the department of sociology. Nobody ever saw him in the McNeil building. As I said, he was in the museum. So, he came. There was a lot of excitement. And he started tearing apart the whole idea of – not ethnomethodology but of schools and labels. He said, "I looked up this book, something on symbolic interaction – what is it? What is symbolic interactionism? Something Blumer made up to name the stuff people were doing anyway. And then, there is 'labeling theory' – what is it all about?" That was an interesting lesson in not taking schools seriously. I learned a lot there, for this was the first time I have heard anybody critiquing the whole idea of schools.

The second time – and I forgot about that – involved orals we had to take after the comps. I had my orals, and the committee included him, Digby Baltzell, and Victor Lidz.

Shalin: How do you spell Balt. . .?

Zerubavel: B-a-l-t-z-e-l-l. He was the guy who coined the term "WASP." Anyway, Digby Baltzell asked me something about Chinese society, and Goffman interrupted him, "I am sorry, what is this thing 'Chinese society'? There are 900 million people there – how can you talk about them as one society?" Basically, it was a discussion between these two about macro and micro. That was it. Other than that, there was no more contact between me and Goffman.

Shalin: So the first class you took was just watching a maestro in action.

Zerubavel: Yes, but I'll still tell you that he was a reluctant teacher. From time to time, he would give a little two-minute lecture. Once, I remember, he talked about reflexivity in Mead – it was brilliant! To hear Goffman talk about Mead – that was unbelievably fantastic. Also, his critique of the concept of spontaneity – this guy really believed in what he wrote in *The Presentation of Self* about “calculated spontaneity.” He was real paranoid, didn't believe anything he saw. I remember, for example, a slide of a woman falling from a horse. The photographer caught her falling off the horse. She is grimacing like this [showing a mask of fear]. Someone, I don't remember who, was saying that you can see the fear, the pain. And he said, “No, she is just a very good actress.” I said, “Who is the audience there?” And he said, “Everyone is an actor or an actress. The only difference is that the good ones make us feel that they are spontaneous, that they are genuine.” It is very interesting to hear that from a guy who introduced that paranoid perspective into sociology. You can understand where it came from.

Shalin: You said the second class was. . . .

Zerubavel: The second class was bad because, you know, watching one minute of interaction over and over.

Shalin: Did it have the same title?

Zerubavel: No, no, no, he called it something different. Instead of a 500-level it was a 600- level class with much more advanced people in it. But it revolved mostly around him and the other conversation analysts who were on post docs there. It was not interesting. One minute of the same tape, of the same conversation – I didn't get anything from it. But the first class. . . . In that class he used the term “frame,” and we all read Bateson, but we didn't know that he was writing a book about frames. Mind you, the book came out in 1974, and this was 1972, and I had no idea about it. In 1974 my wife took a course with him, she was in folklore, so he let her in his class. . . . She was writing a paper on Robbe-

Grillet, and he mentioned the work he was doing on frames and gave her a manuscript. She comes home and says, "I have this manuscript," and gives it to me. I look at it, see that these are the galleys, titled *Frame Analysis*. I say, "What?!" I had goose bumps. That is how I found out there was going to be a book *Frame Analysis* – from the galleys. And I thought, "How come he never mentioned this?" I couldn't believe it. This was a very thick book, hundreds of pages of galleys. I thought the concept of what he did was fantastic. It never occurred to me that someone would do a book on that. While he was finishing his book, I was actually watching him think through those ideas in class.

I have to go now.

Shalin: One last thing. In one of the memoirs I found a remark attributed to Goffman that he didn't think women belonged to a graduate school, or something to that effect.

Zerubavel: He was a misogynist.

Shalin: On the other hand, he singled out Sherri Cavan, he took your wife seriously, his last graduate student was Carol Gardner – there seems to be an odd dynamics here. On the one hand, he might have had a misogynist streak; on the other hand, he gave his unpublished manuscript to a woman.

Eviatar, I cannot thank you enough. This is such a rich material for reflection.

Zerubavel: You talked to Tom Scheff, right?

Shalin: Yes, I am in communication with Tom.

Zerubavel: You missed Murray Davis, who died last year. Murray and I had so many conversations about him.

Shalin: You mentioned Sam Heilman – is he at CUNY?

Zerubavel: Oh, yea, he will be available, I am sure. Let's go down the hall. . . .

[End of the recording]