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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Sherri Cavan about Erving Goffman entitled "Goffman's "The Insanity of Place" as an Exercise in Self-Ethnography"

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Goffman's "The Insanity of Place" as an Exercise in Self-Ethnography

Sherri Cavan and Dmitri Shalin

July 23, 2009

Greetings, Sherri:

I pulled out my copy of *Relations in Public* to make sure I'd given you the right reference to Goffman's "Insanity of Place" (IP), and then ended up reading the whole piece all over again. The tale is even more riveting than I remember it. Now that numerous witnesses chimed in on what had happened between EG and Sky, the autobiographical nature of the IP narrative stands out ever so clearly. This is an astounding piece of self-ethnography, which shows the promise as well as the pitfalls of the genre.

Just think of all the symptoms that a family member with the manic-depressive tendencies exhibits:

The "manic begins by promoting himself in the family hierarchy," he "no longer has time to do his accustomed share of family chores," "displays anger and impatience," "becomes hypercritical and derogatory of family members," "moves backward to the grandiose statements of the high rank and quality of his forebears," entertains "an exalted view of what he proposes soon to accomplish," enters "public life . . . through its least guarded portals: participation in voluntary work," promotes "get-togethers of work personnel, and embarrasses status divisions, by trying to bring together for conviviality everyone at work who is remotely within social reach."

Here is more:

"There may be a surge in home entertainment that is unstabilizing," "gatherings become socially bizarre," producing "aggregations of persons of widely different social rank," "some sexual promiscuity may occur of the kind that can be realized at will because it trades on marked status difference," "family secrets are confidentially divulged at informal gatherings."

And finally this:

"Critical national events such as elections, war policy statements, and assassinations [John Kennedy?], are taken quite personally."

We know from various sources that Sky exhibited most of these symptoms before she had committed suicide. Goffman's article strikes me as an attempt

to write "the final word" on what has happened. It reads as an exercise in remedial work where EG is straining to present his side of the story and bring up to date his take on mental illness articulated in *Asylums*. The writing is as passionate and brilliant as it is self-serving and theoretically flawed.

The premise on which Goffman's argument hinges – "Medical symptoms and mental symptoms, so-called, are radically different" – strikes me as wrong. It flies in the face of the recorded history where medical symptoms have been subjected to conflicting definitions. Epilepsy, leprosy, syphilis, depression, tuberculosis – every one of these ailments has been culturally framed, with direct, sometimes, deadly, consequences for those on the receiving end of a social diagnosis, depending on whether the medical disorder was cast as divine inspiration, demonic possession, moral degeneracy, or a mysterious scourge requiring immediate community interference.

It is also not true that every mental disorder entails an afflicted person who is bent on imposing his or her loony self-concept on the world and disrupting stable hierarchies. Nor should the disruption that mental illness causes obscure its medical roots, its psychosomatic origins responsible for much of the social symptomatic. It troubles me, also, that the symptoms listed in IP are found in rebellious classes, groups, and individuals whose mental status is questioned by the authorities.

"The manic is someone who does not refrain from intruding when he is not wanted," explains Goffman. "He does not contain himself in the spheres and territories allotted to him. He overreaches. He does not keep his place." Many protest movements are "manic," according to this definition. Some have actually been disparaged by those in power who cast insurrections as driven by "deranged lunatics" and "mad crowds." This goes for the French Revolution, Antislavery Movement, Civil Rights protests – and, I am compelled to add, by the padres familia of all ages and stripes who have treated their family members unwilling "to keep their place" and determined to sustain "uppity self-concepts" as inane, and sometimes, insane. The home place is sure to look "insane" to the entrenched powers that lament the growing "inanity of place" and call for reigning in "troubled members." Reading IP with a new pair of eyes that EGA has afforded me, I kept wondering if EG would have favored forced institutionalization under the circumstances he describes.

Which brings me back to Sky. We know from numerous sources, including her letters, that she was unhappy with her life, that she and her son could be left alone on Christmas Eve while her husband trundled to Las Vegas, that she wanted to go back to school and finish her dissertation. We also know that Erving was deeply conservative when it came to family hierarchy, the place

each member was accorded in it, and the social mysogenation uncertified contacts may beget. It seems natural to assume that Sky would rebel at some point and try to carve out a different place for herself in the family and the world. One can understand if, under the circumstances, Erving would be uneasy about her involvement in social reform and philanthropy.

No doubt, the form the Sky's rebellion took was colored by the psychosomatic ailment inscribed in her family history (Sky's mother committed suicide through self-immolation). But just as *Asylums*made me think that EG underestimated the embodied, medical side of mental illness, "The Insanity of Place" reminded me that the socio-historical conditions embedded in family life may exacerbate depressive symptoms.

Sorry inflicting this on you, Sherri. I have not done any writing on Goffman since the last year when I delivered a paper at the ASA, and it will be some time before I can start doing justice to the materials collected in the Goffman Archives. I felt like running a few ideas by someone who shares my fascination with the subject.

All best, **Dmitri**

July 23, 2009

Dmitri---. . . I think you are right on all points and in particular, the political perspective in support of established hierarchy built into his analysis. I was bothered by it too, even though I described him to you as very conservative. I guess I did not realize how deeply his commitment to conservatism was. I am sure he would support jail for political insurgents. I wonder how he dealt with Tom's adolescence.

I really liked your analysis a lot. Yes Goffman's essay is more riveting in light of what the archives have illuminated. All of those examples Goffman gives (some of which would seem odd to make up, e.g. the mentally ill tend to do volunteer work. Huh?) correspond to the properties of events in his own life documented in the recollections of others. And also pretty sad. It can be read as a cry for absolution, i.e. "to those who saw me as the villain in my relation with my late wife, this is what I had to put up with."

I wonder why Goffman wanted to take Insanity of Place from the relative obscurity of Psychiatry and append it to these essays assaying the public order, especially since he says that the first six essays were written to be

published together and the appendix was not (even so, according to his will Relations in Public was not a big seller. I suppose a case could be made for reading IP as an applied study of the forms of interaction he develops in the six chapters, for example examples of remedial exchanges, what happens to "the with" etc. But because the appendix was written years before the essays; it is not so much an application as an illustration. So then the question, what does it illustrate? By the way, I believe Helen Perry was the editor of Psychiatry.

Interesting that he acknowledges Ed Lemert (who I mentioned to you in an earlier e-mail) along with Helen and Stewart Perry and Sheldon Messinger. There is also a lot of acknowledgments to William Labov throughout the book. Did you say that Gillian remarried Labov?

Anyway good job. You are right, we have no idea what is buried in those archives

my best

Sherri

p.s. do you plan to run your ideas before Sheff's Goffman group?

August 3, 2009

. . .

On a different subject, I woke up last night realizing that the symptoms EG cites in his IP piece highlight the "manic" phase of the disorder rather than the "depressive" one. I wonder if this can be interpreted as a sign that EG didn't mind the family member's depressive states as much, perhaps because the latter do not openly threaten the interaction order the way "manic" behavior does when the person refuses to "keep one's place."

Just a thought on the social labeling of mental symptoms. All best,

Dmitri