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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Peter Archibald about Erving Goffman entitled ""If You Are Such a Great Sociologist, Why Are You Still in Canada?" My Encounter with Erving Goffman"

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Peter Archibald:
"If You Are Such a Great Sociologist, Why Are You Still in Canada?"
My Encounter with Erving Goffman

Dr. Peter Archibald, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the McMaster University, wrote this memoir at the suggestion of Tony Puddephatt and the request of Dmitri Shalin and gave his permission to post the present version in the Erving Goffman Archives.

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In about 1980, Goffman was invited to give a lecture and meet with students, professors and alumni of the former Joint Program in Social Psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. I begin my story with some background about this program and its members, including myself, because I think it helps us understand our own reactions to Goffman. Nevertheless, we left our encounter with him not feeling we understood more about his work than we had previously. Furthermore, as to Goffman himself as a person, a character, in some respects he remained an enigma, and other respects it left us wondering whether some of the stories and unflattering jokes we had heard about him, some of them seemingly overly cruel, might actually have been justified.

The Joint PhD Program had been established many decades earlier and was officially staffed and run by members of both the Psychology and Sociology departments at U of M. Both departments had venerable older faculty, like Ted Newcombe in Psych and Guy ("Ed") Swanson in Soc; students were required to take six courses in each of the separate departments as well as three pro-seminars taught jointly by members from each. However, faculty in Psych outnumbered those in Soc by about 3 to 1, many more of the former did their research in institutes and had lighter teaching loads, and more Joint students had interests in psychological theory and laboratory experiments than qualitative research and theory inspired by the Chicago School(s). This probably meant some underlying feelings of superiority among the former and envy and resentment among the latter. In fact, I was apparently the last student to graduate from the Joint Program (in 1971), and typically, while psychologists attributed the marriage breakup to clashes between personalities, the sociologists claimed the problems were social organizational!

In this context, I was a bit of a mongrel and dilettante. I had an undergraduate major in Psych but a minor and MA in sociology. At Michigan I first drifted into the Psych camp, but then became involved in the student New

Left and interested in Marx and historical sociology. Yet, I then used the latter to incorporate rather than simply critique and dismiss mainstream social psychologies. One of my first publications as an integrationist was a lament for the marriage breakup (the Joint Program) and the continuing war between the separate social psychologies ("Bad Fences Make Bad Neighbours",***British Journal of Sociology***, 1976). Another was a review of research on micro-stratification which combined Goffman with Marx ("Face-to-Face: The alienating effects of class, status and power divisions", ***American Sociological Review***, 1976); and yet a third was a book length critique of mainstream social psychology, but which again incorporated rather than simply ignored or rejected it (***Social Psychology as Political Economy***, 1978). Although, with Gouldner, I worried that Goffman's view of social structure was too episodic and ahistorical (he was later to partially correct this in "The Interaction Order"), I praised him for combining many strands of sociology; not only those that emerged from Chicago, but more generally. And again, used his research and theorizing to "flesh out" my interpretations of alienation, and so on.

I have included the latter elements of my vita not to "blow my own horn" **now**, but to stress that they blew it **then**, developing for me a positive social and self identity as a respected, general social psychologist with considerable knowledge and use as well as respect for Goffman's work. To reinforce the first premise, which helps explain my subsequent responses to Goffman, face-to-face, the Bad Fences article brought invitations to quest edit special issues as well as write articles on the "micro-macro problem;" Seymour Martin Lipset asked my permission to reprint "Face-to-Face" in a new edition of the Lipset-Bendix reader on social inequality (which never materialized); and Social Psychology as Political Economy was generally well-reviewed in Britain as well as North America. It became widely used as a text in Canada and occasionally in the United States (Melvin Seeman used it at UCLA), and might have been used more there if McGraw-Hill had not presumed that Americans would not be interested in it and then not printed and distributed copies of it there. In the wider pond of sociology and social psychology, I was definitely only a small fish. Nevertheless, I was a medium-sized one in my own pond (certainly in Canada), and I felt I deserved some respect from others and myself. As for my genuine interest in and apparent understanding of Goffman's work, some important part of the respect others accorded to my own work probably came from others having found my interpretations and use of Goffman's helpful. Some people told me so.

With this background, let us go back to the festive re-union of the (by then officially defunct) Joint Program, Goffman's participation in it, and his audiences' responses to that participation.

It is difficult to underestimate the excitement that anticipation of these festivities generated in us, the audiences to be. We had been trying to get Goffman to come for years. A year or two before, the organizers were told by a secretary that we could not even contact him directly, because he was incognito in Las Vegas, studying gambling! And, of course, I would finally get to meet one of my own, personal heroes, and ask him where **he** thought he had come from theoretically and methodologically, and how **he** thought admirers like myself **should** interpret him.

Well, Goffman's lecture was largely a disaster from the point of view of faculty and many student alumni, and especially those whose identities as professional social psychologists were deep and genuine. It was on and titled "The Lecture," the implicit theme being that lectures are superficial performances which professors use for self-interested purposes like demonstrating their fancy "footwork", or better, "face-work." Lectures are neither intended to, nor do, impart much if any real knowledge. My former professors were clearly offended, as Goffman presumably wanted them to be, and the positivist realists from the psychology "team" probably took the talk as evidence for the shoddy research and theory they believed to inhabit the stage and team in sociology. Goffman's own performance appeared to be mean-spirited and dismissive rather than light-hearted and teasing; that is, to gently goad the audience into becoming aware of the importance of the delivery in addition to the content, so that they could better understand themselves as well as make their deliveries more effective. What a difference Goffman's performance was from that of Gary Alan Fine, who a decade or so later, gave a lecture on the sociological significance of "dust" to the sociology department at McMaster! It was not only a much better performance, but an ingenious way of demonstrating the great importance of sociological research and theorizing.

His lecture was not the only forum where Goffman created a storm. The tradition of the reunion was for the guest speaker to have brunch the next morning at the University's mansion in the woods with current students and faculty from the two departments and alumni like me. So, there was I and about 10 others, sitting on the floor of a large room with a beautiful view, eating scrambled eggs and bacon and drinking coffee, when along comes Goffman, who sits with us. I think my conversation with him started with him asking me where I was located, and my answering that I was a Canadian, as he had been, and that I was teaching sociology at McMaster. Surprisingly and disturbingly, Goffman's immediate response was this: "If you are such a great sociologist, why are you still in Canada?" I don't recall whether I answered his question, or, if I did, what I said. Needless to say, I was flabbergasted and

resentful.

To that point I had neither mentioned my own work nor made any pretence to presenting myself as "such a great sociologist." In Goffman's own observations and theorizing, there are "rules of considerateness" that require one to allow others to present themselves as **they** see fit, in order to make **you** predictable and **them** feel more comfortable, so that the interaction can be sustained, and collective as well as personal tasks can be accomplished. Instead, Goffman appears to have demonstrated "the aggressive use of face-work", if not to improve his own "face" at my expense, then presumably at least to leave and end the encounter. However, Goffman did not leave. Instead, as some of his own students and colleagues have suggested about Goffman, perhaps this was a test, to see whether I could withstand this abuse, by at least defending myself if not "bettering" him (but sinking to his own lack of civility in the process).

After I more or less regained my composure and decided not to respond in kind, I chose another strategy. I ignored the challenge to my worthiness for respect (and previous loyalty to Goffman himself), exercised "discretion" and "considerateness" for Goffman and mentioned **my** enduring problem: where was Goffman "coming from" in terms of sociological traditions, and how could we best understand the purposes of his work? It was only then that I alluded to my own work described earlier here, and that it often included interpreting and using his. However, Goffman's answer was a very general, conventional and not very helpful, and perhaps evasive: Blumer's dictim that face-to-face interaction should be taken as a primary reality in its own right. Even at that early point in my own career, I had already struggled with Goffman's substantive theorizing and thought he had brilliantly integrated Cooley and Mead, Durkheim, Park and so on, and gone on to create an impressive body of theory in its own right, despite often denying he had done so.

Having not gone very far in answering my attempt to redirect the conversation, Goffman appeared to give the initiative back to me, in a way that could be taken as a means for me to "stake a claim" for respect. Specifically, since I had implied that one of my attempts to understand and use his work was published in a book, he asked me about its content in general, and I answered that it was a critique of mainstream social psychologies but also an attempt to integrate aspects of them into a larger approach. Goffman then asked what the particular audience for this work was, and I replied established scholars, but that it was also being used as a textbook. Goffman's return to civility, if that was what it was, then disappeared. He abruptly stood up and said loudly, "You mean we have been discussing a mere **textbook?!**" He then stomped off, leaving me and the rest

of his audience "holding the bag."

I was embarrassed as hell. Goffman, I told the other students and alumni, must be demonstrating other features of his own work. He was bored with us and our conversation, and deliberately "created a scene," to have the interaction break down, so he would have a chance to leave and find relief. At that point I really did begin to feel aggressive rather than conciliatory, and recalled one of the jokes about Goffman that I then hoped was a true story. Someone is alleged to have said, "Shut up, Erving, or I'll hoist you onto the Manhattan phone book and punch your lights out!" Damn, Goffman had succeeded! He had forced me to be uncivil too. Had I failed his test because I had not been a "man" and defended myself directly to him, and thereby indicated my worthiness for respect? Was his leaving a cruel attempt to not let me get it back?

One might think that was the end of that (true) story, but surprisingly, it was not! Who should come back in the room and sit down with us and act as if nothing had happened, but Erving! This was too much. I had to "balance the interchange" (sic). "That was rude, Erving," I said. "Were you using aggressive face-work because you wanted to escape a conversation that bored or threatened you? Why didn't you just leave rather than deliberately embarrass us?" But Erving said nothing and just sat there.

We may never know where Goffman "really came from." Perhaps he never came from any one place, geographically or scholarly. Perhaps he never **arrived** at any one place and **stayed** there? Goffman's observations and explanations about social interaction and our beliefs and feelings about them are hugely insightful, and, as Lofland has put it so elegantly, invoked the "aha" phenomena in all of us. I have often used those insights, not only to understand the social world around me, but to control my own actions. However, I have frequently not been very good at it, and "learned the hard way." One of my classic experiences occurred while I was hitch-hiking to the far reaches of Northeast Nova Scotia to visit my brother and his family. I was given a lift by a local farmer who, as Goffman stressed most of us do, most of the time, was very concerned to know my occupation and thereby "place" me; so he would know how to act and protect himself. Thinking he might be threatened if I told him I was university professor, I instead said I was a "teacher." This seemed to satisfy him, and he proceeded to tell me how his daughter was a teacher, and so on. However, as the conversation progressed, he kept asking me other questions, like what subjects and grades I taught, and of course, I eventually had to admit that I was a university professor. Well, he rightly became angry and complained that I had not said so right from the start. Now he was worried that he had not treated me with as much

respect as I deserved, and that he had been made to appear undeserving of much respect either!

I'd like to think I'm a better person, not only for having had experiences like that, but from having had the benefits of Goffman's insights as a means of understanding my experiences and adjusting my subsequent thoughts and actions accordingly. However, why did Goffman himself so often not practice what he preached?

My understanding is that the project to which I am contributing here is largely dedicated to using Goffman's biography as a means for (a) interpreting his work and writings, and perhaps also, (b) his comments and actions to others in his own, everyday life. The latter would include his uncivil and rude treatment of other social scientists like me. In principle, I have no quarrel with these enterprises. Perhaps, for example, his **Stigma** was partly inspired by his having grown up Jewish in a small, rural Canadian town where there were few Jews, and those who were there, were discriminated against. Had he not himself had those unpleasant experiences, his accounts of stigma might not have been so perceptive and useful. It is also conceivable that his own, uncivil treatment of others was in retaliation for or insecurity from that, his short height or American chauvinism, metro/cosmopolitanism and so on that he experienced and/or simply felt inferior about. (I often attribute my own aggressiveness and rudeness to my domineering mother. Growing up with her, being more assertive than her to make space for myself or only "milk toast," which was my father's more typical strategy, often appeared to be the only options.)

These phenomena of social perception and attribution are interesting social psychological problems in their own right. **Why** do **we** engage in **these** exercises like concentrating on the personal interests and motives of the researcher and theorist rather or more than the accuracy and usefulness of the research and theory themselves? Worse, in my opinion, why do we **excuse** people like Goffman (and ourselves); let them "get away with it," or still worse, **justify** the uncivil things they do to others, **for them**, so they don't have to do it themselves?

In "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," Goffman himself suggested that one of the privileges of high status is having others be more tolerant of one's own deviance from social norms. He did not explain this much or well, but it is consistent with Functionalist, Social Exchange and "Status Expectations State" theories of stratification. To wit, we defer to higher status others because they have, or we believe they have, contributed more to the group or society than we have. As Edwin Hollander put it, we give them "idiosyncratic credit."

Indeed, related ideas can be found in no less a critic of most societies as Karl Marx: the Oriental despot is deferred to because he has organized irrigation for the community, and the feudal lord a grist mill, marriage ceremonies and other benefits. The industrial capitalist employer does little more than dominate and exploit his or her employees, but they mistakenly believe that s/he is only a capitalist because s/he was first a leader, rather than the other way round. Durkheim and Weber added further, useful wrinkles: it is not necessary for everyone to believe that elites deserve deference: even small majorities can enforce outward deference on the others.

Do **we** put up with "jerks" like Goffman, or perhaps more fairly, Goffman **when** he was one, because we are overwhelmed with the apparent brilliance of his intellect and writings; or because, with so many others proclaiming his superiority, we do not want to appear dumb, or simply different? Social psychologists have also made other, equally unflattering suggestions. Once we have deferred to someone genuinely (because we felt they deserved it), should we later learn that s/he did not deserve that deference after all, we then feel so much regret and/or feel so "stupid" about ourselves, that we look for and embrace excuses for having done so anyway. (For me, this is what "cognitive dissonance" is **really** about.)

As I see it, the history of interpreting Goffman as a person as well as his writings is strewn with incidences like these. Did Goffman have too cynical a view of us humans and how we treat others (e.g., Gouldner)? No, he was simply documenting and lamenting "the decline of civility" (Peter Manning). Should Goffman have made his underlying methods and general theories more explicit, so that we could have better understood and used them? Perhaps not, because he had good reason to believe that he would be inaccurately interpreted and then wrongly held accountable anyway (Becker). Was Goffman being an uncivil, unethical and irresponsible jerk to me? Not really, he was only playfully teasing and testing me, to see whether I could handle embarrassment, so that our mutually beneficial interaction could be sustained. (Actually, I counted my encounter with him a net loss, and generations of my colleagues and students have heard about how shabbily he treated me.) Should **I** continue to interrupt other people, "get my own [often literally] two cents worth in" and then excuse this because I had a domineering mother? No, she is long since dead and I am over 70 years old. We should all grow up and accept responsibility for what we say and do.

This said, just as parents and members of the wider community, we should be reticent to judge others' character simply by this or that statement or action, so we should try to judge Goffman's writings without prejudicing or dismissing them, as one might do if one emphasizes his apparently frequent uncivil

treatment of others. Interestingly enough, and perhaps tragically, Goffman's having seldom made explicit his own research methods and underlying, general theories; whether because of neglect, defensiveness or disinterest on his own part; came back to haunt him even while he was still alive. Many of his fellow sociologists had criticized him, and still do, for allegedly not having been either a rigorous, primary researcher; and certainly an ethnographer; or a systematic, general theorist.

Goffman himself appears to have lamented this, and occasionally mentioned and became defensive about it. For example, in the interview with Verhoeven, Goffman conceded that he based his generalizations about asylums largely on the basis of having studied only one of them, but claimed that these generalizations have turned out to be largely accurate. Similarly, Goffman expressed his disappointment to Bennett Berger, a former student, that so few fellow sociologists had appreciated him as a general theorist. ***Frame Analysis*** was intended to change this, but most interpreters (wrongly, we believe) have taken that work to indicate a foray into totally new directions for him (social constructionism or ethnomethology), rather than a systematic summary and explication of much of his earlier, underlying general theory.

I and some former graduate students have been working to correct the above, common criticisms of Goffman's work itself. Much of it was in fact heavily empirical and comparative, if not necessarily in conventional social scientific ways. Similarly, much if his theory was general and induced from systematic empirical generalizations, albeit as with most general theory in practice if not in rhetoric, it was also often arrived at and/or used deductively. Few if any of us go into the field without general presumptions, and many accounts by researchers and methodologists of what has been done or even could be done are probably highly unrealistic and inaccurate, and far from what Glaser and Strauss had in mind. As for substance, Goffman borrowed a great deal from his ancestors, not only one but all of Spencer, Cooley and Mead, Park and Hughes, Durkheim and Parsons, and so on; and he was a great synthesizer and innovator rather than just a washer of a mess of dishes in the same sink.

Goffman may or may not deserve such loyalty and devotion as a person, as a **character**. However, his **mind** and his **work** most certainly do.