

12-21-2013

Dmitri Shalin Interview with Peter Miller about Erving Goffman entitled "The Perilous Journey of the Self and the Salvation of Private Life: Reflections From Dmitri Shalin's 'Interfacing Biography, Theory and History: The Case of Erving Goffman'"

Peter Miller

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

Miller, P. (2013). Dmitri Shalin Interview with Peter Miller about Erving Goffman entitled "The Perilous Journey of the Self and the Salvation of Private Life: Reflections From Dmitri Shalin's 'Interfacing Biography, Theory and History: The Case of Erving Goffman'". In Dmitri N. Shalin, *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives* 1-4.

Available at: https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/goffman_archives/88

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

Peter Miller

The Perilous Journey of the Self and the Salvation of Private Life: Reflections From Dmitri Shalin's 'Interfacing Biography, Theory and History: The Case of Erving Goffman'

Dmitri,

Having read and reflected on your excellent 'crypto-biography' of Erving Goffman, I have reformulated my thoughts and recollections for use at EGA.

Warm regards,

Peter

December 21, 2013

This 'crypto-biography' of Erving Goffman recalled my visit to his home in the north Berkeley hills, in 1967. The house was quite grand, in a lovely sylvan location, with many rooms. I recall thinking he seemed lonely. Was there a wife? I had no idea, was totally ignorant of Angelica's suicide three years earlier. But I recall thinking there was something missing there, some enormous blank space that it would not have been appropriate to mention. Erving was very cordial, very polite, somewhat subdued, and as always, brilliant. He had a talent for making another feel like he was the most important person in the room, and giving the impression that he had all the time in the world for the conversation at hand.

Since others interviewed for the Erving Goffman Archive have reported being treated less politely or even dismissively, I feel obliged to inquire why I was treated so well. As a Ford Foundation Fellow and highly recommended by Daniel Bell from Columbia, apparently I was considered something of a prize by all the Berkeley Sociology faculty. I wasn't aware of how conditional and time-bound this high regard was, and rather naively took it as my due. Within the space of the few years it took to earn a Ph D, my value on the academic job market had plummeted, due to my being neither a person of color nor female. Attributing the lack of such credentials to my parents, I accepted employment in applied research and never regretted it. This subsequent

personal history, though it unfolded some years after meeting Erving Goffman, prompts some speculations on further applications of his paradigm of impression management.

Impression management can have fateful consequences for success or failure in love, work, or whatever goals one is interested in pursuing. As Erving Goffman knew very well from his own experience and studies, people 'size you up' on the basis of first impressions -- physical appearances, age, sex, ethnicity, dress, class, mannerisms, and other clues to whether the person is 'one of us' or not. His take on how the standard and non-standard demographic categories come into play in everyday life remains a breathtakingly original examination of the structure of common sense. Goffman pioneered a 'self-centered' methodology that proved to be both innovative and risky as a scientific enterprise. As Shalin's biography makes clear, Goffman made abundant use of his own life-experiences. Goffman's origins as a Canadian small-town Jew determined to excel in the higher echelons of North American culture recall those of the novelist Saul Bellow, another brilliant writer of social anthropology-cum-philosophy. Goffman's ascent-by-marriage into the heights of WASP society provided rich material for analyses of what was for him essentially an immigrant experience.

The early encounters with his wife-to-be remind me of the scene in 'Annie Hall' where the Woody Allen character is portrayed as he thinks the Hall family see him -- as an Orthodox-Jewish Yeshiva student with black hat and dreadlocks, a creature from 'beyond the pale'. The young Goffman is evidently at pains to make himself seem worthy -- not least of all to himself -- of the high-WASP connection. At the same time, he cherishes his own authenticity, a value of the highest order, sanctified by no less than Lionel Trilling, himself the first Jewish member of the Columbia faculty, whose affected Anglophilia was well-known there.

From the Shetlands to the underworld to the corridors of academe, Goffman drew intensively on his own experiences, willfully creating some when the research need, as he saw it, arose. This latter practice of calling into being circumstances likely to test the limits of acceptable conduct naturally irked many of his colleagues and students, whose commitment to science did not extend to their being turned into unwilling experimental subjects. This method of filtering everything through his personal experience was essential to Goffman's methodology. He always sought to experience what he wrote about. He never wanted to write as a conventional academic, at arm's-length from the material; Only by immersing himself in it could he find out what it was all about. He once told me that when he first went to the Shetlands, he thought the women there looked like seals. After six months there, he found them

attractive. Then, he said, he knew he was ready to start his research. So it is not hard to imagine that he could have willed himself to become personally involved in whatever seemed sociologically productive. This extraordinarily close inter-weaving of life and work makes for a highly risky scientific enterprise. Goffman was sometimes not above using his personal and professional prestige to settle scores or advance his favored preferences and causes. It is precisely to guard against such excesses that the scientific obligation to treat one's own preferences with suspicion exists. Goffman's best work is rigorously scientific in this sense, even if he did not use quantitative methods. The use of one's life-experiences for research purposes is not itself inherently suspect, rather it is that the risk of skewing the analysis is vastly increased.

As important as impression management is in democratic societies, it is even more fateful in societies where you can be imprisoned or killed for the 'wrong' attitudes. Although Goffman never traveled to the Soviet Union, his writings apparently struck a responsive chord there, and later throughout the former Soviet Empire. It's easy to see why: Everyone had to lead a double life, the officially approved one, and the real life of family, friends, and intellectual or artistic pursuits. For people in such an environment, impression management is not merely a game or method of career advancement, it is a matter of survival.

It would be interesting, though probably a career-ending move in the current academic environment, to apply Goffman's paradigm to contemporary American academic and cultural institutions. How do people reconcile their loyalty to 'progressive' ideals with the prevalence of warrantless and unconstitutional domestic spying, mass surveillance and violation of privacy, continuing unemployment, out-of-control debt and money-printing, selective enforcement of laws and regulations, and continuation of preferences based on race and sex? Like residents of the former Soviet Union, managing this prodigious feat of cognitive dissonance requires that its practitioners adopt one 'face' for their official and job-related dealings, while reserving another for the shrunken sphere of privacy remaining to them. Had Erving Goffman lived long enough to extend his studies of impression management to this group, we would have learned even more about the ingenious survival tactics and strategies that evolve in such situations.

These intriguing gaps in a life-work that ended too early (at only 60 years of age) do not detract from research that it must have taken great courage to pursue, in the 'face' of the overwhelming dominance of political economy in social science research. Not only was it difficult to obtain funding for the micro-scale research that Goffman specialized in, it was also subject to ridicule

by those who regarded it as unscientific, or, when it attracted a following, as faddish. With a wit and style comparable to Jane Austen, Henry James, and Gertrude Stein, Erving Goffman gave us an extraordinarily insightful look into how our most important social relationships -- the private lives we share with our closest associates -- work. This is all the more important in an age when the threats to personal privacy in America are greater than at any time in its history. Future readers seeking to know what private life was really like when it existed will do no better than to consult the writings of Erving Goffman.