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Dmitri Shalin Interview with Angelo A. Alonzo about Erving Goffman entitled "I asked Goffman If He Had Time and He Said "No" But If I Wanted to Talk as He Ran a Couple of Errands on Telegraph Ave I Was Welcome to Come Along"

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Remembering Erving Goffman

Angelo A. Alonzo:

I asked Goffman If He Had Time and He Said “No” But If I Wanted to Talk as He Ran a Couple of Errands on Telegraph Ave I Was Welcome to Come Along

Dr. Angelo A. Alonzo, professor of sociology at the Ohio State University and Yale University, wrote this memoir for the Erving Goffman Archives at the request of Dmitri Shalin and approved posting the present version on the web.

[Posted 04-28-14]

Reflecting on Irving Goffman is a sad pleasure. Pleasure comes from my admiration for him and his monumental body of work. Sadness comes from knowing he will not directly provide new insights. Yet, he is still providing them by the many conceptual offspring he left us and the many students he shared himself with. I took two classes with him during the 1964-65 academic year at Berkeley. In one of the classes he was working on the draft of what was to become the basis for *Frame Analysis*. He would arrive at the classroom, as others have described, with folders overflowing with pictures, newspaper clippings, pages from books, books and another folder of his typed and overly hand corrected manuscript pages, usually quite dog eared. He was extremely serious and nervous most of the times, bringing a great deal of energy to his carefully orchestrated presentation, always closely monitoring our responses to his presentation. There was a certain amount of performance anxiety as beads of perspiration formed on his brow and on his shirt. We did not ask many questions for fear of disrupting his train of thought and I think as curious as we might have been on occasion to inquire about an ambiguity we did not want to hear ourselves speak but to obtain every bit of wisdom, content or idiosyncratic observation he could impart to us. Our collective goal was to have an acknowledgement in one of his over abundant footnotes for a concept, item or citation to one of our unpublished class papers.

I worked with Mr. Goffman on the research for my Master's Thesis. It was to be an interview study of the everyday life of mentally challenged men and women living in the community by themselves, in half-way houses or with their families. He had provided me with the name of a contact person in the California Department of Mental Health in Sacramento. As a consequence of a few telephone calls and my travel to Sacramento to be checked out, I was offered access to a list of individuals in the East Bay Area who were under the supervision of the CDMH. The best part of the contact he had made was that I would receive transcription services! The interviews proceeded nicely, so I thought. Each week I would send the taped interviews to Sacramento and in about two weeks nicely typed transcripts would arrive by mail. All went well for several months. Then one day when we were talking about my progress with the ongoing analysis and interviewing, he said the CDMH wanted to stop the

interviews because they did not like what I was finding out. He said that is "Too bad, that's the way things go sometimes." He was philosophical about the experience. However, after spending several months of interviewing and analyzing the interviews it was a bit disappointing to say the least. Several days later the department instituted a change in the requirements for the MA degree, partially because the MA thesis was turning into little dissertations and students were taking far too long to complete their degrees. There was also an element of liberalizing the structure of program as a consequence of the Free Speech Movement.

My work with Mr. Goffman is a segway into rumors as to his availability. I found that if you wanted to meet with him you had to be prepared to do it on his terms wherever that might be, whether in his office, not very often, his home, or on the street. Most of the arrangements for the MA thesis were accomplished by telephone or at his home. One of the most enchanting experiences I had with him was when I encountered him coming out of Barrows Hall. I had a couple of questions to ask him and asked if he had time, he said "No" but if I wanted to talk with him as he ran a couple of errands on Telegraph Ave I was welcome to come along. We dropped something off along the way and then went into the Post Office on Dwight Way. The place was its usual busy self with three windows open and four people deep. He quickly assessed the situation, picked a window, put his hand in the cage holding two fingers up and with his other hand slid change for two stamps. Without a pause the postmaster slid two stamps in his direction, he beamed, licked the stamps and posted his two envelopes. To this day when anyone in the family gives a cue, we always say we pulled a "Goffman."

The last memorable encounter I had with him was one fall day and I again ran into him coming out of Barrows Hall. The day before this meeting I had cut the palm of my hand when a new jar of jam collapsed as I was trying to twist off the lid. I had to go to the student health center and have a few stitches. Upon seeing my hand he said "What happened?" I explained and he asked in a jovial manner, "What flavor was it?" I said raspberry, he laughed and bounced down the stairs and down the street.

We had many more encounters while working on papers and my thesis, but these are the most memorable for some reason. He left Berkeley after my generals, as did I, and I never saw him or spoke with him again. His influence is evident in almost all my teaching, writing and research.

* The Erving Goffman Archives (EGA) is the web-based, open-source project that serves as a clearing house for those interested in the dramaturgical tradition in sociology and biographical methods of research. The EGA is located in the Intercyberlibrary of the UNLV Center of Democratic Culture, <http://www.unlv.edu/centers/cdclv/archives/interactionism/index.html>. Postings on the website are divided into several overlapping sections: "Documents and Papers," "Goffman's Publications," "Goffman in the News," "Biographical Materials," "Critical Assessments," and "Comments and Dialogues." For inquiries regarding the EGA projects, please contact Dr. Dmitri Shalin, shalin@unlv.nevada.edu. When you cite the materials collected for the EGA, please use the following reference: *Bios Sociologicus: The Erving Goffman Archives*, ed. by Dmitri N. Shalin (UNLV: CDC Publications, 2009).