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Remembering Erving Goffman

Ralph Turner:
The Presentation of Self Reminded Me of Dale Carnegie's
Best Selling How to Win Friends and Influence People

Dr. Ralph Turner, professor emeritus of sociology at the University of California Los Angeles, wrote this memoir for the Erving Goffman Archives and approved posting the present version on the web.

[Posted 08-26-09]

August 4

Hello, Dmitri,

I have read the materials you sent me and given considerable thought to your request. After reading your essay and the three interviews you sent, I realize that my own interaction with Goffman was much too casual and infrequent to permit the kind of understandings and reactions that you are dealing with. I have read and appreciated most of his works, including The Presentation of Self, which I read in 1958. My first impression was of an affinity to Dale Carnegie's best selling How to Win Friends and Influence People, which I had read in the 1930s. Although the aim of the two books was quite different, both tried to bring to light the subtle nuances of interpersonal encounters. I notice that my copy, published as a monograph by the University of Edinburgh in 1958, has considerable underlining! Others have noted that The Presentation inspired a broadened perspective of what could legitimately be called sociological analysis. I was impressed that Goffman regarded his thinking as work in process rather than finished pieces. I remarked to him at one time that I found his concept of role distancing quite useful, and his reply was to the effect that he had already gone far beyond that concept.

I must comment that I tend to be skeptical of attempts to explain how a scholar comes to choose a topic or a point of view when the
subject is not around to rebut or enlarge on the explanations, though I respect the effort that you are making to reach a fair and balanced understand of what Goffman was doing.

I know that this reply is not helpful in what you are doing. But I must say again that my relations with Goffman were never extensive or deeply personal enough to be really useful for your project.

With best wishes, Ralph