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Backstage with Erving Goffman : the context of the interview.

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Publishing an interview with Erving Goffman gives one the feeling of taking a look backstage, because it is well-known that he did not like to be interviewed. The act of turning backstage into frontstage is not without consequences for our feelings, which was true for me as the interviewer: It was with a certain pudency that the decision was taken to open the file of a conversation that took place many years ago. Because it was such a difficult decision, I thought that it would be good to (a) give the reasons for this interview, (b) indicate the context of the interview, and (c) explain the topics that were covered in the interview.

1. Why publish this interview?

Twelve years ago, I had the privilege of speaking with Erving Goffman about his work, his intellectual background, and the institutional development of American Sociology. He was most kind to give an interview to a person who was doing a job that he viewed, as he said during the interview, as not the most important thing a sociologist could do. Sociology should be about facts, not about the ideas of sociologists. Goffman gave permission to tape the interview, but he asked not to be quoted. The latter was not unusual as Yves Winkin (1988, p. 231) mentioned in relation to the interview he had with Goffman some time before mine.

As he requested, I did not quote Goffman's remarks at the time, and I did not give any thought since then to publishing the interview itself. But recently, an invitation to publish it came to me from Stuart J. Sigman', a former student of Erving Goffman's, acting as the associate editor of *Research on Language and Social Interaction (ROLSI)*. This came some time after Yves Winkin — who has published a lot on Goffman's work and is currently working on his biography — got a transcript of my interview and asked me to reconsider my opinion about publishing the interview because he thought that it contains information

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worth sparing with other scholars, all the more since Erving Goffman died 10 years ago. Although this argument is very reasonable, it was not an easy decision. I came to the conclusion that publication could be considered only if two conditions could be met. First, I wanted the consent of Professor Gillian Sankoff, who is the executor of Goffman's estate. Second, because the interview was not meant for publication, some editing of the transcript would have to be provided, of course without doing any damage to Goffman's thoughts and speech. In view of the fact that Robert Sanders, as editor of ROLSI, agreed to assist with both matters, and because the content of the interview could be interesting to scholars and useful for a better understanding of Goffman's work, I have accepted the invitation to publish the interview.

Two considerations entered into the editing of the transcript. First, the major part of the interview was about the work of Goffman and the development of Sociology at the University of Chicago, but some minor parts.— as happens in interviews— have no real significance for a better understanding of Goffman's scholarly work. For that reason, short portions of the full transcript are omitted and replaced by brief summaries of the content of the remarks in order not to harm the presentation of the rhythm and atmosphere of the interview situation.

A second matter involved keeping the transcript of the interview faithful to Goffman's speech as it was recorded. But this is not without problems: Spoken language often includes infelicities of speech not always worth printing, and these infelicities may not fully express the intended sense. This meant that some editing had to be done, and I consider it a great advantage that this was strongly supported by Professor Gillian Sankoff and Professor Robert E. Sanders, the editor of ROLSI. If Erving Goffman's ideas are fully expressed in the printed interview, it is through the help of both of them.

2. Why this interview?

In 1980, I was working on a project about the links between European Interpretative Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism as it was developed by H. Blumer, his colleagues, and students (1). Although European Interpretative Sociology and Symbolic Interactionism have

different roots, I expected that, as far as metatheory and methodology are concerned, similarities and differences between them would be found; I searched for the reasons why. To get a grip on Symbolic Interactionism, I used two methods: First, I read the work of the so-called symbolic interactionist scholars; second, I planned to interview as many of them as possible. I consider the first method the most important because published work shows what a researcher has done and what he or she wants to tell the readers. But although this approach should be sufficient to understand research methods and results, it does not always offer enough information about the intellectual background and the basic (metatheoretical) assumptions of the researchers. Moreover some research reports are the result of a collaboration and cannot express the personal views of each researcher. To find an answer to these shortcomings of published work, an interview of these scholars would help because: (a) it creates the possibility of asking for an explanation of less accessible parts of papers or books; (b) it gives an opportunity to get a more lively picture of the career, the working conditions, and the networks the researchers belong to or have been part of; and (c) the interviewee has the chance to explain the different stages he or she went through in his or her professional work.

A major problem of this project was the selection of the researchers who could be considered to belong to the group of symbolic interactionists and who were trained by and/or worked with Blumer in the 1940s and 1950s in Chicago. One of the names on the list was Erving Goffman. During that period, he was at The University of Chicago, had published papers and books in which some affinities with the stance of Symbolic Interactionism cannot be denied, and, moreover, by many he was considered to be a symbolic interactionist. In the 1970s, not only American scholars (e.g., Mullins, 1973, pp. 75-104; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1977, pp. 67-75) applied the label of symbolic interactionist to Goffman, but Europeans did it as well (e.g., Zijderveld, 1973, pp.139-147; Helle, 1977, pp. 161-171). This opinion was not shared by others, however, for example, Shibutani, who, was my mentor at the time I was working on this project. Shibutani got his training at The University of Chicago, was for many years a colleague of Blumer and Goffman, and published (among other books) a festschrift in honor of H. Blumer (Shibutani, 1970) (2). These facts made Shibutani a very interesting informant about the development of Symbolic Interactionism. More than others, he stressed the link between Goffman and E. Hughes, the tradition of R. E. Park and E. W. Burgess, and G. H. Mead and J. Dewey. In spite of this opinion about Goffman's questionable relevance to my project, Shibutani stimulated me to seek an interview with him.

Indeed, when I prepared for the interview, my reading of Goffman's work was in the beginning influenced by a symbolic interactionist interpretation, but this changed later on because of Shibutani's critical remarks about such an interpretation and my reading of Goffman's (1974) *Frame Analysis*. The new ideas I formed about this work gave another perspective of Goffman's sociology and pushed me to reconsider my original standpoint. On the other hand, it did not change the fact that Goffman got his training at The University of Chicago when opposition was growing between a qualitative and a quantitative approach in Sociology, where he was considered to belong to the former group. In that respect, it was still interesting to know what his position was in relation to other qualitatively oriented sociologists, even when in *Frame Analysis* his differences with Blumerian Symbolic Interactionism surfaced. Another reason to contact him was that he participated in the evolution of post-war American Sociology and was himself very much in the center of it, although he never hired researchers, coauthored a book, or was a chairman of scientific organizations, except when he was elected as president of the American Sociological Association in 1980. Moreover, because he had been a colleague of H. Blumer for several years at The University of California, Berkeley and he had many friends among the so-called symbolic interactionists, his experience could throw light on the development of Symbolic Interactionism.

In conclusion, there were three reasons why the interview with Goffman was important for my project: (a) it would help me to attain a better knowledge of the institutional background of the development of Symbolic Interactionism, (b) it would improve my understanding of Goffman's position within the development of Sociology, and (c) it would provide more information on research methods because his books are rather brief in this respect.

As to the position of Goffman in the sociological landscape, it may be interesting to take notice of the recent change in the way he and his works are being labeled. The widespread picture of Erving Goffman as a symbolic interactionist began to fade by the end of the 1970s (3). New labels appeared, but as much as Goffman was opposed to that first label (Symbolic Interactionism), he refused as strongly to accept the later ones (e.g., Ethnomethodology, Structuralism, etc.), as is clearly shown in the interview. These days, few analysts seem to stick closely to the symbolic interactionist interpretation of Goffman's oeuvre (e.g., Helle, 1992). During the past 10 years, several of Goffman's interpreters, although stressing his

originality, made allusions to the links that can be drawn between his work on the one hand and Symbolic Interactionism, Ethnomethodology, Conversation Analysis, and Structuralism on the other (see Drew & Wootton, 1988; Hettlage & Lenz, 1991). Some (e.g., Waksler, 1989) pointed to the potential value of Goffman's work for future developments in Phenomenology, Ethnomethodology, and Conversation Analysis (4).

3. The main topics of the interview

When I went to interview Goffman, I had read the major part of his publications and had some questions prepared that were directly linked to his books. But mainly I prepared a rather general scheme of topics instead of a list of questions, and the sequence and content of the questions were adapted to the course of the interview. The general pattern of my questioning was the same as for the others I interviewed.

What was this pattern? As just noted, my interest was on metatheoretical and methodological problems and the definition of the object of Sociology. The latter topic is, of course, a crucial one, because the nature of the object places demands on what methods to use for collecting data. Because Goffman had been very brief in his writings about the formal and explicit description of the object of Sociology, and his main theoretical treatise was about "frames," some questions had to be asked about what he viewed as the object of Sociology.

In general, all the interviews I conducted began with the basic assumptions of the scholar, that is, global assumptions about the nature of the object of research (Radnitzki, 1971; Strasser, 1973, p. 203). Not all researchers express these assumptions explicitly, although they always rely on them. When taking the writings of a researcher as a starting point, it is possible to reconstruct their presuppositions up to a certain point. Nevertheless, a basic principle, for this project was to question explicitly the interviewees about their basic assumptions. The first list of topics was about their assumptions in relation to (a) their vision of man and society, (b) their opinion about the ontological position of social reality, (c) their view of knowledge, and (d) the social functions of research (i.e., questions about the objectivity and the political meaning of research). Although opinions about such matters are not always the result of systematic reflection, I felt they might be very influential in regard to research methods. They are also interesting for understanding networks among researchers.

A second list of topics was about the logic a researcher has to follow to attain reliable knowledge. These were questions that were to be expanded by information about research methods. Within this framework, questions about the meaning of theory, scientific laws, hypothesis, evidence, concerns, and the like came to the fore.

However, from the beginning, the interview with Goffman took another course. Immediately after we finished our introductions and before I could introduce my first topic, Goffman asked about my position concerning Symbolic Interactionism, and that was the beginning of a long criticism he made of labeling in Sociological theory. The transcript shows that it was not always possible to keep Goffman in a predetermined track, with the consequence that his views on particular topics were not always offered in one block. Nonetheless, the interview did cover the major themes I was interested in, and the editor, associate editor, and I thought it was better to preserve the actual course of the interview and present the conversation as faithfully as possible.

One aspect of the interview that the transcript does not show is its pace and the setting; it would have made it too long. A short description might give a glimpse of the scene. The interview took place in Goffman's study, with the windows wide open; after all, it was morning on a hot, sunny day. Next to Goffman's house, construction work was going on, and although it did not constantly disturb the conversation, Goffman had to cope with the squeal of an electric saw; the humming of the engine of a crane; and the hammering, talking, yelling, and whistling of the construction workers. Goffman spoke clearly, sometimes raising his voice to stress his opinion and/or to cope with the noise of the street. Most of the time his speech came without hesitation, but sometimes the sentences came very slowly, with cautiously chosen words and with long pauses. Although Goffman warned more than once not to take him too seriously, he spoke in measured terms and was very specific about persons and books. Without doubt, it was a depiction of a part of American Sociology as he saw it.

During the interview, Goffman warned,

« It seems to me that you can't get a picture of anyone's work by asking what they do, or by reading explicit statements in their text what they do. Because that's by and large all doctrine and ideology. You have to get it by doing a literary kind of analysis of the corpus of their work. »

If we take his warning seriously, the only route to understanding his work would be a close study of his publications. It certainly is the most important source of information about the results of research.

On the other hand, it seems to me that inviting a scholar to reflect on his or her work creates the possibility of getting an insight into the decisions it took to do the kind of work he or she did within the framework of the concept of Sociology of the time. Sociology, after all, did not develop according to one track. Many tracks have been followed, all with the same purpose: to come to a better understanding of human behavior. Goffman had to choose his track, and what he produced was a brilliant analysis of social interaction. What is shown in this interview—after he had already published his major works—are his options and the institutional and scientific background from which these options were taken. These are facts that might contribute to a better understanding of his work.

Notes

1. I was at that time an American Studies Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (New York) and was graciously supported as well by the Belgian National Foundation of Scientific Research.
2. Goffman did not offer to submit a chapter for this book.
3. To my knowledge, the best overviews of the scientific labels applied to Goffman are found in Lenz (1991) and Twenhöfel (1991).
4. From my own standpoint, see Verhoeven (1985), which is an elaboration of Verhoeven (1982).

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